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The Broken Fetter

John K. Leys





Light
1908





THE BROKEN FETTER



BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

THE LINDSAYS

THE LAWYER'S SECRET

AT THE SIGN OF THE GOLDEN HORN

UNDER A MASK

THE BLACK TERROR

A SUBURBAN VENDETTA

A SORE TEMPTATION

THE PRISONER'S SECRET

HELD IN THE TOILS

THE HOUSE-BOAT MYSTERY

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING



THE BROKEN FETTER

BY

JOHN K. LEYS

AUTHOR OF

"THE BLACK TERROR," ETC.

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THE BROKEN FETTER





THE BROKEN FETTER

CHAPTER I

The Narrative of Roger Stanford, M.B.

I have been requested to state shortly, in writing, the circumstances of my first meeting with Ursula Beritza. As far as my memory serves me, the facts are these.

Shortly after midnight on Tuesday, the 19th of March, I was awakened by a loud peal at my doorbell. Before I had time to throw on my dressing-gown and go to to the window there was another ring.

"Who is there?" I called out.

"Are you the doctor?" came a woman's voice from below.

"Yes."

"Can you come at once—come now, sir?"

"What is the matter?"

"A young lady, sir. She is very ill. I think she is dying."



"What is her illness?"

"I can't tell. She seemed to be quite well this evening. But, oh, sir, do please make haste!"

I shut the window with a bang, went downstairs, and opened the front door. It was raining fast, and the night was dark and cold, but the woman would hardly step inside, so impatient was she to be gone.

I dressed hurriedly, putting on a thick overcoat, and started with my companion. She seemed (so far as I could judge in the darkness) to be a servant of the better class, from forty to fifty years of age. But though my age was only about half of hers she walked as fast as I did. I put several questions to her, but she could tell me no more than this. The young lady had retired shortly before twelve, and when my guide had entered her room a few minutes later, she had, to her horror and amazement, found her stretched on the floor, insensible, and apparently dying.

After walking rather more than a mile, we turned down a narrow road, and stopped opposite a high garden wall —a wall so high that the house within the enclosure was quite invisible. My companion took a key from her pocket, opened a door in the wall, and, when we had passed through, shut and locked the door behind us. Then we went along a path that lay between some thick evergreen shrubs, and across a paved courtyard between the stables and the back part of the building. My guide did



not knock or ring, but produced another key and opened the door herself. Then she led me through a short passage, across a spacious hall, up two flights of stairs, and along a corridor.

Another moment and I was standing in a large room, nearly empty of furniture. There was a bed; and a tall woman dressed in black who was sitting on a chair beside it rose as I entered, and without speaking to me passed out of the room. That much I saw without looking, as it were. As soon as my eyes rested on the figure lying on the bed, I could see nothing else.

At first I thought I was looking on the face of the dead. I had never seen such a death-like appearance on any living face. She was quite a young creature, very slender and girlish; she lay fully dressed on the top of the white counterpane, her dark hair spread over the pillows, and one tiny white hand hanging down over the edge of the bed.

I went up to her, felt her pulse, her heart—no motion, not a sign of life. Yet somehow I was not convinced that she was gone, and the old servant and I set to work to try and restore her to consciousness. It was a tedious task and sometimes I all but lost hope. However, after two hours of toil, I saw signs that told me that I should succeed, and a few minutes later my heart throbbed with pleasure as I watched a faint tinge of red come to my patient's cheeks, and heard a faint sigh escape from her lips.



She opened her eyes and said something in a language I did not understand. The servant, who had remained in the room all the time, bent over the bed and answered her in the same tongue, upon which she seemed satisfied, smiled slightly, and closed her eyes.

A minute or two later, as I was holding a teaspoon filled with brandy to my patient's lips, she looked me full in the face and—I am ashamed to confess it—my hand trembled a little. Never had I beheld in human eyes such a look of gentle dignity, and for the first time I realized how beautiful she was. Each feature, though small, was perfect in form. Her complexion was now of a soft creamy whiteness; delicacy and grace enveloped her like a garment.

Again she addressed a word or two to the servant at my side, and again the woman answered—this time in English—

"It is the doctor."

"Have I been ill?" she said, wondering.

"Oh, very ill. This gentleman has saved your life."

"A look, in which surprise and gratitude were intermingled, broke like a sunbeam on the girl's face.

"I think you are all right now," I said; "but some one ought to sit up with you for the rest of the night."

"I will do that," said the woman at the bedside, with an emphatic nod.



My patient was still very weak, and I sat down on the only available chair to wait and see whether the faintness would return. And as I sat there in silence a question that had been whispering in the back of my head, as it were, for the last two hours, recurred to me with new force—how did this sudden illness arise? I could think of no substance, no poison even, which could have produced such symptoms as I had witnessed. Had it not been for the absence of any signs of violence I could have believed that the girl had been nearly drowned, or half strangled.

Rising, I went over to the bed and looked at my patient. She glanced up at me with a pleased expression.

"I cannot understand," said I, "what can have caused your illness, and it is important that I should find out in case of your having a relapse. What have you been eating lately?"

She paused a moment before answering.

"I have not eaten anything since dinner," she said.

"When was that?"

"Half-past six."

"So long ago as that! You had no supper?"

"Only a biscuit."

"Nor anything to drink?"

"Nothing but a cup of coffee which I made for myself after dinner. I had some of the same coffee for breakfast.



"And found no bad effects from it?"

"None at all."

"I cannot understand it. You must surely have taken something to hurt you: and yet—. Tell me truly, please—Did you take nothing in the way of a sleeping draught?"

I feared that she might be offended, but instead of that she seemed to be slightly amused at the question. A faint smile stole over her features as she answered,—

"Oh, no. I never took a sleeping draught in my life."

I was completely puzzled, and none the less so when, turning my eyes by chance in the direction of the woman who had summoned me to the house, I saw that she was watching me intently with firmly-compressed lips, and a singular expression of face.

"You ate nothing but a biscuit," I repeated, "and drank nothing for several hours before this attack, and all in a moment, as it were, you are at death's door. Did you feel any sensation of faintness as you came upstairs?"

"No—none. I came into my room feeling perfectly well."

"And nothing happened after that? Try to think—tell me everything you did since you entered the room. You drank no water, even?"

"No. I came forward to the dressing-table and put down my candle. There was a very pretty scent bottle



of Venetian glass on the table; and I remember I took it up to see what sort of scent it held."

"You smelt it?"

"Yes; I took out the stopper—it was rather tight, I remember. It was a strange scent."

"And then?"

"Then I must have fallen down. I don't remember any more after that."

I turned away, and paced up and down for a few moments, to hide the agitation I feared must appear in my face. For I knew that there is a poisonous gas, of which few but professional chemists know even the name, which is so deadly in its effects that a single inhalation of it may cause death. It seemed almost incredible that this gas had been put into a scent bottle. But there were the facts. I could explain them in no other way.

And if this was the true explanation of the girl's mysterious illness, what could it mean but—murder? A chill ran through my whole body as the thought crossed my mind. To murder an innocent creature like this! And if I was right, what deep infernal cunning had the would be murderer shown! If it had not been for the accident of the servant coming into the room, the poor girl's body would have been found lying on the floor next day, stark and cold. And what doctor could have even guessed at the true cause of her death? Not one!

"Where is the scent bottle?" I asked, sharply.





THE BROKEN FETTER

CHAPTER II

The Scent Bottle

It would be impossible for me to convey, by written words, any idea of the tumult of thoughts that crowded and surged together in my mind as I passed through the dark and solitary lanes to my own dwelling. Nor can I appeal to anyone's experience to imagine what I felt.

To some few men, no doubt, it has happened that they have been suddenly brought face to face with crime, or rather, with the dark suspicion that a crime has been committed, and that upon their shoulders, and no other, lies the duty of bringing the criminal to justice. A doctor—if such there be who reads these lines—who has ever suspected that an apparently anxious husband or a tearful wife was in reality a secret poisoner, may partly imagine my feelings. But even he cannot realise them. For even then I was conscious that the girl, whom I had brought back almost from the brink of the grave,



was more to me than any ordinary patient. My heart throbbed when I recalled the outline of her face and form, the expression in her eyes, the tones of her voice. Certainly a fairer, sweeter, purer creature never breathed the breath of life. And this gentle girl some wretch had sought to destroy! I swore an oath to myself that if it cost me every moment of my time, and every penny I possessed, I would clear up this mystery, and if murder had been attempted, do my utmost to avenge the outrage.

The first question that occurred to me was—Should I go straight to the police-station at day-break, and tell my story to the superintendent in charge; or should I first of all pay my second visit to the patient, and endeavour to learn some additional facts. The latter I soon saw, would be the best in fact the only rational course. There would be no use in going to the police till I had a definite charge to make against some person, or at least conclusive evidence that a crime had been attempted.

I managed to get a little sleep, and by seven o'clock was downstairs again. During breakfast I asked my housekeeper whether she knew anything of the people who lived at the large house at Three Elms, as the locality was called.

"Oh, you mean the old Manor House?" answered Mrs. Greene. "That's been let to a foreign gentleman for the last four months. They say he is a Jew."

"What is his name?"

"Eli something—some foreign name as ain't easy to be remembered. The folks about here call him Mr. Eli."

"Do you know what sort of a man he is?"

"Oh, I suppose he's something in the city. Them foreigners mostly is. But he's very quiet—sees no company—and apparently lets the whole place go to rack and ruin."

"What is his family?"

"He's got none."

"Then who is the young lady that stays there?"

"There ain't no young lady. There's only the housekeeper—a foreigner like himself she is—and one servant, likewise a foreigner. The house is as good as empty, as far as society goes. If a nice family had come to live there it would have made such a difference to the neighbourhood. When I was a girl—"

I cut short the good woman's gossip, finished my breakfast, and set out for the Manor House.

I found my patient decidedly better; but I advised her to remain in bed for a few hours, and not to go out until the following day.

When I left her I asked for the master of the house.

"Mr. Lobieski is from home," returned the servant. "He went away the day before yesterday."

"The day before yesterday," I repeated. "And when will he return?"



"That I can't tell, sir. He seldom gives notice of his coming and going."

"Who is in charge of the house then?"

"I suppose it's Madame," answered the woman with a slight toss of the head.

"Madame who? What is her name?"

"Madame Fabrini."

"Please tell her I wish to speak to her."

I was shown into a large, half-furnished room; and in a few minutes the tall, dark-haired woman whom I had seen for an instant in the sick room the night before came in, bowed stifly, and seated herself opposite to me.

"The lady upstairs," I began—"by the way, what is her name?"

"I do not know her name."

"Not know her name!"

"No. I only know that she is a friend of my employer. She called last night to see him; and the servant, it seems, knew her as a tolerably frequent visitor, and admitted her. I understand that she is a ward of Monsieur Lobieski, or something of that kind. At any rate she seemed quite at home here, so, as it was rather late for her to return to town, I asked her to stay overnight, as she has often, I understand, done before."

Somehow this speech sounded to me as if it had been



prepared beforehand. The explanations all came pat, without any prompting from me. Having finished what she had to say, Madame Fabrini shut her mouth tight—her under jaw I noticed was of prodigious size and strength—as if she was determined to say no more.

"Will you please give me the scent-bottle you took from the young lady's room last night?" said I.

An indescribable change—slight but unmistakeabale, a certain contraction of the eyes, a certain tightening of the lips, came into the housekeeper's face as I said these words.

"The scent-bottle? What do you mean? What do you want with it?"

"I want to examine it. Is it yours?"

A slight, a very slight hesitation, then—

"Yes, it is mine. And what of that?"

"Only that I wish to see it."

"Why?"

"Because I believe the girl upstairs was nearly killed by using it."

I was interrupted by a loud, scornful laugh.

"Ha, ha! This is too absurd. How could anyone be injured by using my scent-bottle? I ought not to have left it in Mademoiselle's room; but I had placed it there thinking it would make the miserably furnished room look more—what shall I say? more decorated, more civilised. When I hear the commotion of Mademoiselle's



fainting I go in, and find my beautiful scent-bottle rolling on the floor. So, to prevent its being broken I take it up, and place it on my own mantelpiece. Is there anything ver' extraordinar' in that?"

The woman's manner was insolent. Her foreign accent, which had been hardly noticeable before, had come out strongly. If her appearance and manner were unpleasing when she first entered the room, they were absolutely repulsive now. But I took no notice of her behaviour, and merely said,—

"Oblige me, then, by allowing me to see it."

"You are unreasonable!"

"Very good. You do not seem to comprehend that this is a serious matter. It looked to me very much as if there had been———" I stopped abruptly. "If you do not at once produce that scent-bottle," said I, "I shall go at once to the nearest magistrate and obtain a search-warrant."

Madame Fabrini stared at me out of her big dark eyes for some seconds, as if she hardly understood what I meant. Then she burst into another loud mocking laugh. It did not sound to me forced. The contempt in it seemed genuine, and made me wonder for the moment whether I was not on the wrong track altogether. Suddenly rising from her seat, she said,—

"Since you so much wish it, you shall see this miraculous scent-bottle. Oh, yes; you shall see it!" And with a

sweeping half-curtsey of ironical politeness she left the room.

My reason for wishing to inspect the scent-bottle was this—I knew that it would be difficult, certainly very dangerous, to introduce the poisonous gas I had in my mind into the scent-bottle. But it would be comparatively easy to make it in the phial by dropping into it three substances and leaving them to develop the fatal gas by their chemical action upon each other. Now, one of these three substances possesses a peculiar odour, and unless the glass scent-bottle had been very thoroughly cleansed I believed that I would be able to distinguish the smell if the bottle had really held the substance I speak of.

Madame Fabrini was gone perhaps a minute—rather a long time, but not too long for her to reach a room in a distant part of that great house and return; hardly long enough for her to rinse out a vessel thoroughly.

She came into the room with a look of contemptuous triumph on her face.

"Here is the wonderful scent-bottle that can make a lady faint all in a moment!" she cried, holding it up to the light.

It was of dark purple, or rather a rich, deep blue tinged with purple, nearly opaque, very fragile, and of a curious beautiful shape.

"Will you smell it?" she said, half-mockingly, as she



placed it in my hand. "Or perhaps you are afraid?"

Without replying, I removed the stopper, which fitted tightly, and not without a little fear of the result, applied my nostrils to it. It had something in it which gave forth a strong pungent, peculiar odour, but not the odour I had expected. Holding the bottle up to the light I could see that a small quantity of a dark, viscous substance lay at the bottom of it. I smelt it again. Yes; I could imagine that to some people it would be very agreeable. Whatever it might be, it was fairly entitled to be called scent.

"Will you let me show this to the young lady, and ask her whether this is the same bottle she found on her dressing-table?" I said.

"So you doubt my word? But as you please. Bah! Do as you please."

I left the woman and went upstairs.

The girl seemed surprised to see me again so soon.

"Yes, that is the same scent-bottle," she said, taking it into her hand.

"Smell it very carefully, please," said I. It was just possible, I thought, that hers might be one of those singular constitutions that cannot endure what to others is harmless, or even pleasant. I removed the stopper, and she inhaled the scent timidly at first, then more boldly.

"That is the same scent I tried last night," she said with a smile; "but it doesn't seem to hurt me now."



"No; the scent could not have hurt you," I said, half absently.

"What do you think caused my illness, then?"

"That is just what I should like to find out. I see nothing in the state of your health to account for it; and I am driven to the conclusion that, whether by accident or by design, some one has injured you. The case is a mystery to me. In fact, the circumstances seem so suspicious, that I almost think the police ought to be informed. Perhaps their enquiries—"

"The police! You do not mean that you would bring the police here?"

"I was thinking of reporting the facts to the proper authorities. Why should I not?"

"I do beg and entreat you not to do that! It would be the most unkind thing you could do."

"Unkind? Why? How?"

The girl bit her lip, and half turned her face aside. She was evidently embarrassed.

"Mr. Lobieski would not like it," she said at last. "It would make people talk, and cause an esclandre—what you call a scene, a scandal, in the neighbourhood. It would be dreadful."

"Indeed, you are mistaken," said I. "The police will conduct their investigations with the utmost discretion. No one outside the house will know that anything unusual has taken place."

But all I could say was of no use. The girl was a foreigner—I could tell that from her accent, slight as it was—and she had probably been brought up with exaggerated notions of the power of the police to cause annoyance to innocent persons. Her chief care seemed to be that her host should be spared all unpleasantness; and it was with some difficulty that I avoided pledging myself not to give information to the authorities. I left her without making any promise, but I had not yet made up my mind what steps I should take. The case was so full of unsolved mysteries that I thought it might be better to say nothing to anyone until I had seen Mr. Lobieski.

On my way downstairs I met the servant, and she offered to let me out by the back way, which would save me half-a-mile's walk. I accepted her offer, and followed her to the back door and across the courtyard.

As we were proceeding along the path through the shrubbery, my guide being a few steps in front of me, I saw the pale spring sunbeams flash upon some small object that lay on the gravel. It glittered like a diamond. I stooped and picked it up. It was a morsel of Venetian glass, the colour a deep blue, tinged with purple.

CHAPTER III

Alone and friendless

Yes, there could be no doubt that I held in my hand a fragment of a scent-bottle precisely similar to the one I had just shown to my patient. The trick was evident. The housekeeper had had a pair of scent-bottles exactly alike. She had not imagined that I, or anyone would suspect the means she had used to accomplish her purpose; or perhaps she had been afraid to undertake the task of cleansing the one charged with poisonous matter. When I asked for it, she had fenced with me in order to gain time; or, very likely she was unwilling to destroy a thing that was in itself so beautiful. At any rate, she had hit upon the idea of putting a small quantity of the disguising scent into the clean scent-bottle, and presenting it to me as the original one which the girl had used, breaking the latter into fragments and throwing them away.

This discovery placed it beyond a doubt that foul play had been attempted. My course seemed plain. I walked straight to the nearest police station.

I had some distance to go, and when I arrived there I found that the superintendent whom I had hoped to find at his post—an intelligent man named Spendril, with whom I was slightly acquainted—was absent in London. As he was expected to return in a few hours, I preferred to wait until he came back, rather than give information to the sergeant in charge, who, I felt tolerably sure, would do nothing without instructions from his superior.

I went home, therefore, and I found there an urgent message from a patient whom I knew to be in a critical condition. I was detained at her house the whole day, as her case required constant watching, and there was no efficient nurse at hand. It was not till late that I considered her out of danger, and felt at liberty to go home.

By that time I was far too tired to set out again for the police station; and I knew that the journey would be useless, as the superintendent would not be there at that hour, and in any case nothing could be done that night. But I was haunted, even in my sleep, by fears of what might be taking place at the Manor House. I had left a young girl, ignorant of her danger, at the mercy of a cruel, and unscrupulous woman, who, however she might pretend ignorance, even of her victim's name, must have caused the illness that had so nearly proved fatal. True, there

was the servant, who seemed to suspect the housekeeper. And it was some comfort to think that Madame Fabrini must suppose that she had successfully wheedled me, and that she would naturally pause before making any fresh attack on the girl.

I felt sufficiently uneasy, however, to pay a visit next morning to the old Manor House.

I walked up the grass-grown avenue, and knocked at the front door.

It was opened by the servant I had seen before.

"How is my patient to-day?" I asked.

"She is quite well, sir. She has gone."

"Gone!"

The word fell like a knell upon my heart. Not till that moment had I realized what a hold this young girl had gained on my affections, how I had looked forward to seeing her once more. I stood speechless, my eyes on the ground. The woman remained silent, looking at me.

After a few moments I roused myself.

"And Madame Fabrini? She is at home, I suppose?"

"No, sir. She has gone too."

"What! Did they leave together?"

"Oh, no, Madame left yesterday, soon after you went away."

There was only one explanation of this. She must have watched me, and seen me pick up something from



the gravel. Guessing from my close inspection of it what I had found, she had realised that she was in danger, and had at once decamped.

But the woman was already closing the door. Evidently she wished to see no more of me. I nodded to her and turned slowly away. At a few paces' distance I paused and looked back at the great, empty house. My eyes roamed aimlessly over the rows of blank, staring windows; and all at once my heart gave a great leap!

I had seen her!

I had seen a slender form, which I had no doubt was hers, pass rapidly before one of the windows.

I immediately went back and knocked. The door was opened, and before the servant could prevent me I had stepped inside.

"You told me a lie just now," I said, sternly. "The young lady who was so ill two days ago is upstairs. I saw her at the window. I shall not leave the house till I see her, and satisfy myself that she is here of her own free will."

"No one is keeping her here," said the woman, sullenly. "She is free to come or go as she pleases. But she does not want to see you again. It was she herself that told me to tell you she had gone away."

"That cannot be true!"

"It is true."

"Well, never mind. She is here, and I must see her. I have something of importance to say to her. Will you be good enough to go and tell her so?"

Without another word the woman turned and left me.

Five minutes later I was shown into a room where the girl was waiting for me.

She came forward and took my hand. A deep blush was on her cheeks. There were tears in her eyes.

"Forgive me," she said. That was all.

"Why did you deny yourself to me?" I said, gently.

"Why did you desire the servant to say that you had gone."

"Because—because I was afraid that you would bring the police here. When Madame Fabrini left so suddenly yesterday, and did not return, I connected it with a hint you dropped about calling in the police; and—I thought it better to go away before they came."

"Why should you be afraid of the police?" I exclaimed.

The girl lowered her eyes.

"I do not know," she said; then added—"Mr. Lobieski would not like their coming here."

"So you thought that by going away, and leaving no trace behind you, you would stifle enquiry altogether?"

She was silent.

"I do not pretend to understand your motives," I said

with a coldness I was far from feeling; "but I may tell you this, that now it is no mere suspicion of mine that your life was attempted two nights ago. The scent-bottle given me by Madame Fabrini, which I showed you yesterday, was not, I believe, the one you saw in your room on Tuesday night. That one, I have reason to think, was broken. I have a fragment of it in my pocket now. Why was it broken? Accidentally? If so, why did Madame Fabrini try to palm off another one upon me as the one you had in your hand when you fell down lifeless upon the floor? I do not say there is as yet proof of a murderous design on the part of this woman; but there is a strong case of suspicion against her. You ought to be on your guard; and I hope you will never spend a night under the same roof with her again."

"I will never do so willingly; but—what do you mean to do now?"

My companion's cheeks had turned slightly paler while I was speaking. That was the only sign of perturbation visible in her face. She seemed far more anxious that the offender should not be punished than that her own safety should be assured!

"Do you wish to shield this woman?" I asked, with a touch of indignation. "Do you comprehend that, in my belief at all events, she has made an attempt on your life? Is she a relation of yours?"

"No. I never saw her before last Tuesday evening."

I was confounded. Here was the prisoner's own incredible assertion repeated by the intended victim herself! For the moment I was shaken in the opinion I had formed of the woman's guilt, and half inclined to think that I had been following a false trail all along.

My companion sank slowly into a chair, and putting her elbow on a table that stood near, leant her forehead on her hand.

"If there has really been an attempt to injure me," she said, "there is only one hand that could have guided the stroke."

"Whose hand?"

She did not answer me. Evidently she was plunged in profound reflections; I doubt whether she even heard me.

To me she was an enigma. I had at first thought of her as a child, and indeed in point of years she was little more. But she was now acting and speaking like a woman—a woman who had more than the usual share of coolness and self-command. For some moments I did not interrupt her reverie.

"If you have suspicions," I said at length, "you would do well to let me communicate them to the police."

She only shook her head.

"I have no right to advise you," I continued, "except to say this, that I think you ought to consult with one of



your friends, some one with prudence and knowledge of the world. If you have a secret enemy, you must be protected from him. You cannot decide on a matter like this alone—"

I stopped, unable to proceed. My companion had removed her arm from the table, and was sitting quietly before me like an obedient child, with her hands folded on her lap. Her eyes were not raised to mine; but suddenly her lip began to tremble. Something I had said had touched the fountain of her tears, and I could see that she was on the verge of giving way. But she did not. She mastered her emotion, and said in a voice that was gentle, but perfectly equable:

"I have no friends with whom I can consult."

"Not here perhaps, nor in London; but whereever they may be—"

"I have no friends," she repeated quietly. "except Monsieur Lobieski; and I do not wish him to be troubled by visits from the police on my account. I will return to London to-day, and you will forget the curious thing that happened to me on Tuesday night."

The half shy, half sad smile with which this was said went to my heart.

"No," I cried. I impulsively caught her hands as they lay together in her lap, and bending down, looked into her eyes

"Can you not trust me?" I said, gently. "You say

you have no friends, none at least who can help you. Will you not let me be your friend?"

"You are very kind," she said; "I feel that you are my friend."

"I mean more than that," I cried. "I am not speaking of a mere vague, general benevolence, a willingness to oblige. I mean, let me be your confidant, your defender. You say you have a suspicion as to the hand that struck the blow that was aimed at you two days ago. Tell me who this person is, and your reasons for suspecting him. Let me stand between you and any second attempt on your life; or rather, give me permission to do the best I can to make any fresh attempt impossible."

She shook her head and withdrew her hand, but did not trust herself to speak.

"I cannot tell you," said I, in a voice hoarse with emotion, "how I long to be of some service to you, to prove to you in some way that the kind of friendship I beg you to accept from me is not an empty sham. One thing I will not do—I will not leave you to go through the world alone, untended, unguarded. I do not ask your confidence—not now. I only beg you to give me the the right of helping you and protecting you if I can."

The answer to this was a look of gratitude that thrilled and melted my heart.

"You do not know what you ask," she said, in a tone so low that I had to strain my ears to catch what she

said. "I am alone, and must remain alone. I cannot share the task of my life, or the dangers of my life, with another, however good and kind he may be."

"Think, I beseech you," said I, "before you send me away. If you refuse my petition we shall in all probability never meet again. How could it harm you to know that there was one to whom your safety and happiness were the most precious things on earth—one to whom you could appeal in any difficulty or danger, one who would reckon it a privilege and a delight to serve you?"

For a moment she seemed to hesitate, but it was only for a moment. In a tone that was gentle as ever, but firmer than before, she said,—

"I thank you a thousand times. I thank you from my heart. But what you ask is impossible. It cannot be."

Why not?"

"You breathe the pure fresh air of heaven, do you not? I live in an atmosphere of concealment, deceit, treachery, and intrigue. I will not ruin your——"

"*You* live in an atmosphere of intrigue! Why, you are a child!"

"I am eighteen," she said, with a gentle dignity that had something of reproof in it. "But I was going to say that I must refuse to permit you, or any one, to share my secrets and my dangers, my hopes and my fears. Do

not pain me by forcing me to refuse your generous offer again. Believe me, I cannot except it."

After this there seemed no more to be said. In some confused words I bade her good-bye, and without trusting myself to look at her again I slowly left the room.

But something within me rebelled. Something urged me not to leave her thus, let her words be what they might. The love in my heart cried like a new-born child, and I could not find it in my heart to stifle the pitiful, hungry cry.

I turned on my heel and went back to the room. The girl I had left was sitting with her hands on the table, and her face bowed down upon them. She lifted her head; her cheeks were wet with tears. Blushing deeply she half rose from her seat.

"Pardon me," I stammered out. "There is only one thing I want to say to you—I believe I saved your life on Tuesday night."

"I believe you did. I can never repay you that debt."

"Yes, you can. If you owe me anything of gratitude pay the debt now. Tell me your story—I know it must be a strange and a sad one. At least tell me enough of it to enable me to form an idea of your position, and the extent of the danger that threatens you. And then allow me to decide whether the friendship, the alliance, I begged for is to become an accomplished fact or not.

You talked a little while ago of ruining my life. A man's life is not so easily ruined. Let me be the judge as to whether I can effectually serve you or not."

"Do you mean," she said, slowly, keeping her great brown eyes fixed on mine—"do you mean that you demand this of me in virtue of the obligation under which you laid me?"

"That is exactly what I do mean."

"Then I have no choice."

She sat for a few moments in silence.

"I will tell you," she said, with a sigh that seemed to be the breath of many weary hours—"yes, I will tell you the story of my life.'

CHAPTER IV

The Refugee

"I was born at the Castle of Beritza, in the district of Kostova, in Russian Poland. I used to hear from the older servants how great and powerful our house had been before the days of the Russian invasion; but long before I was born the Beritzas had been reduced from being great nobles to be merely wealthy landowners.

"My father was a good man, kind and unselfish in his disposition, fond of a quiet, retired life. He had lost my mother when I was but three years old, and before that time several of my brothers and sisters had died. There were only two left, Alexis the eldest, and Ursula, the youngest of all— I mean myself.

"Alexis went into the army, the Russian army of course I mean, but he soon left it; and intimate as he and I afterwards became, I never found out the reason of his throwing up his commission. He then went to Paris, and

from that time our troubles began. Alexis was always in want of money, and the people were too poor to pay much rent, and so we were often in such straits that my father had recourse to the money lenders. It was in that way that we came to know Eli Lobieski, in whose house we now are. He lent my father money, I believe; but he was not so rapacious and pitiless as I am told usurers often are. On the contrary, he has befriended us more than once; and, indeed, he is now the only friend I have in the world.

"Part of the time my brother was in Paris I was also there at school. But I saw very little of him during that time. I also spent a year in a school in Kensington. It was there I learned to speak English. When I was sixteen I went home, and lived for the following twelve months with my father and brother at the old Castle. That was certainly the happiest time of my life. My brother and I were constantly together. We spent the morning in our saddles. In the evening we had music, or chess, or books or papers from Warsaw; or perhaps one or two of Alexis' friends would come to see him.

"The only thing that troubled me was the influence Count Peter Borovitchi, my father's cousin, began to obtain over him and my brother. I could never explain or account for my dislike of this man. Often has Alexis teased me on the subject; and my poor father even tried to reason me into tolerating my cousin, but it was of

no use. I could neither like nor trust Borovitchi.

"Towards the end of that year I noticed that my brother showed signs of subdued excitement. He said nothing, but his face was like an open book to me; and I well knew that something was causing him agitation and anxiety. I fancied a thousand things—thought he must be in debt, or in love, but never imagined the truth. During this time Borovitchi and my brother were constantly together. Our cousin often came to the Castle; and if a week passed without our seeing him, Alexis would ride over to the town where he lived, and not return till next day. My father, I am certain, noticed that something was wrong; and once on my opening the door of a room where my father and Alexis were alone together, I heard their voices raised, and saw by their flushed faces that a dispute was going on.

Still, I had no suspicions of the truth. No one had any suspicions. The blow fell without warning. One day, the winter before last, a party of soldiers arrived at the Castle, and their commander placed all of us—all in the building—under arrest. My father was ill at the time, too ill to be moved; and I have often thought it was better for him that it was so. Both he and my brother had been denounced as conspirators against the Russian Government.

No papers implicating my father were found, and he was not molested.

But my brother—Alexis—was arrested and taken away that night. He was never brought to trial, at least never that we heard of. But one night news came, that Alexis had been seen in a troop of convicts on their way to Siberia—and that night my father died."

The last words had been spoken quickly, lest sobs should choke them back. But the tears I expected to see did not come. Ursula sat looking at the landscape, and it seemed to me that her eyes saw no green English meadows, or quiet cottages, or straggling hedgerows, but wide, snow-covered plains, great desolate rooms, and a black funeral train.

Her sweet lips quivered, but she kept silence; and I, too, said not a word. When her emotion had subsided she began to speak, but in a voice lower than before.

"Our kinsman Borovitchi was arrested at the same time. It seemed that my poor brother had fallen into the company of some Communists at Paris, and had imbibed revolutionary ideas from them. It was believed that he had corrupted my father and Count Borovitchi; and had persuaded both of them to join a revolutionary society. Whether they ever did so or not, I do not know.

My own belief is that my dear father was wholly innocent —that he had been remonstrating with my brother about his views on the day when I came upon them in the library. I believe, too, that Alexis was not nearly so guilty as was supposed. He had always been at heart a

reformer, and had always been in sympathy with our down-trodden people; but he had never had the opportunity, even if he had had the will, to carry out his theories in action. He had no one to speak for him, no influential friend."

"And you have never heard from him?" I inquired.

"Not a word. I did not expect that. But I heard of him once through—I may as well tell you, for I know you will keep my secret—through M. Lobieski. It was true that he had been seen on the march to Siberia."

I was sorry I had spoken.

"And Count Borovitchi—what was his fate?" I asked, in order to turn her thoughts into another channel.

"The Count was released within two months of his arrest. It was commonly supposed that he had been more clever then my simple, headstrong brother in avoiding the possession of compromising papers. I believe there was little or no proof against him, and he was therefore set at liberty."

"I suppose it would be impossible for any one to guess how the Russian Government came to suspect your brother?"

A change came into Ursula Beritza's face as I said these words. It seemed to have become more rigid, and a sudden flash darted from her eyes.

"My father and I," she said, "both believed that some one who had been in Alexis' confidence had betrayed him. And we both suspected the same person.

Our instincts—for we had nothing in the way of proof —warned us that Peter Borovitchi was the traitor."

"He! Your cousin!" I exclaimed. "Surely you must have been mistaken. That would be too horrible. Besides, he shared the danger. He, too, was arrested."

"True; but my father thought it possible that he had arranged that he should be arrested, in order to avert suspicion of his treachery. We knew that he was well treated in prison, while my poor brother had the fate of an ordinary criminal. But I mean to find out whether the Count was guilty of this treachery or not."

She said this with the same quiet composure as though she had been saying that she meant to find out whether the Count were in Russia or in England.

"How can you hope to do that?" I cried. "And even if you should succeed, what would be the use? You cannot avenge your brother; and still less can you benefit him."

"Revenge is not for me," said this singular girl, looking straight at me out of her soft dark eyes. "But still it is necessary for me to settle first of all the question of the Count's guilt or innocence, because it is only through him that I can hope to obtain my brother's release."

"Through him—through the Count?" I stared at her in amazement.

"Yes. In my own mind I believe the Count betrayed

my brother; and though Alexis was never a Nihilist I know Borovitchi is one. If he is really a traitor, he must be betraying them—he could have no other object in joining their society."

"How do you know he is a Nihilist?"

"Because he tried to persuade my brother to become one. Now, if I could only find proof that he is betraying his comrades, I should have him completely in my power. I would only have to show these proofs to—to some one I know, and the Count would be compelled to do his utmost to procure my brother's release. I hardly think the Government of the Czar would care to let it be said they had sacrificed the life of one of their most trusted agents rather than release an unimportant prisoner."

"At all events I should be able to force the Count to strain every nerve—to bribe here and threaten revelations there—in the cause of my brother. He would know that his own life was at stake. My sole object is to deliver Alexis from that sepulchre of the living, a Russian prison. When I can think of a better or a more likely way of attaining it, I will abandon this one; but I can see none; I can think of none; and therefore I must make Borovitchi my first thought, and make it my chief endeavour to penetrate his secrets."

It would be impossible to express the admiration I felt for this girl, so young—she had told me that she was only eighteen—so friendless, undertaking such a

task. But it would have been cruel to tell her how utterly impossible of success her scheme seemed to me.

"Is the Count in England?" I asked.

"Yes; that is why I am here. I support myself by teaching music."

"But—I thought—"

"The estates were confiscated the very day after my father died."

I started. A new thought had leapt, unbidden, into my mind.

"After you and your brother, who would be the heir?" I asked.

"My cousin," said Ursula quietly.

"And do you think it possible that he would be wicked enough——" I could hardly finish the sentence. She finished it for me.

"To make an attempt on my life? I hope not. Yet you seem to think that some one must have tried to murder me. And I am sure of this, that a man who would betray Alexis into the hands of the Russian Government would not hesitate to take a life, if it were necessary."

"I entreat you, Miss Beritza, to give up this wild scheme of yours!" I cried. "It can lead to nothing, and will only expose you to greater danger. How can you pretend to cope with a man like your cousin, a man of resource, with powerful friends, bold, and unscrupulous.

You ought rather to try to find a situation in a family, where you would at least be tolerably safe from his plots. Shall I help you to do that?"

In my agitation I had risen from my chair, and gone close to her. She, too, rose and faced me, with a quiet smile on her face, a smile that told of indomitable courage, of determined perseverance. She shook her head in silence.

"Let me help you, then," I said. "Let me be your friend and ally. You are in danger. I beseech you, let me try to protect you."

"You are very kind," said the girl, softly; "and I thank you from my heart. But what you ask is impossible."

"Will you not even tell me your address, and allow me to call and see you sometimes?"

"I am afraid I cannot. It would compromise me, and I must be very careful."

"Will you not let me write to you?"

"It is better not," she said; but the refusal was gentleness itself.

"At least let me know of your welfare. Pardon me for insisting, but if you only knew how I long to be able to serve you, or help you in some way! I can't hear the thought of your being in danger without my being able even to know of it. Will you not send me the merest line—a blank postcard if you like—once a month, or

once a fortnight, just to let me know that you are safe and well?"

"I cannot refuse to do that," she said with a smile, "after all you have done for me. You shall have a post-card from me every fortnight. And don't suppose that that I am ungrateful! Indeed, I am not. Your sympathy has done me good."

I took her hand to bid her farewell.

"If I could only persuade you." I began, "to give up this hopeless enterprise——"

"To give up the idea of rescuing my brother? No! If I lost the hope of delivering him from captivity I should die. I live for nothing else. I think and dream of nothing else. And I shall succeed! I am glad that my life has been saved—by you—for I feel sure that it was not for nothing that I was brought back from the side of the grave. With God's help, I shall succeed. In any case, you shall know the end."

"And if you need some one to stand by you, will you summon me?"

For a moment she hesitated.

Then a smile shone out in her face; and with a little blush that made her seem ten times lovelier than before, she said—

"That, too, I promise."

CHAPTER V

The Accomplices

Lobieski's Italian housekeeper had brazened it out well before Dr. Stanford; but at heart she was thoroughly frightened. She had seen the doctor stoop and pick up some small object from the gravel, and after examining it minutely, slip it into his pocket. On examining the path she found another morsel of the broken scent-bottle, and understood that the doctor's suspicions must have returned in double force. All at once she was seized with a panic, and without waiting even to pack up her clothes, she hurried off to the railway-station, and took the first train to London.

Count Borovitchi lived in a handsome set of furnished apartments in Upper Neville Street, not far from Piccadilly. In appearance he was decidedly handsome, a little over the middle height, very pale, with dark stern eyes set close together and a short black beard.

He had just finished a late, luxurious breakfast, and was leaning back in his arm-chair, enjoying a cigarette, when the parlour-maid told him that "a lady" wished to see him.

"A lady?" said the Count, in a tone half of surprise, half of mockery. "Show her into the waiting-room."

This was a small apartment at the back of the house, which the Count used for the reception of such of his visitors as he did not care to admit to his dining-room. He calmly finished his cigarette, and then proceeded to the waiting-room, where he found Madame Fabrini.

The Count lounged into the room with his hands in the pockets of his shooting jacket. Closing the door with his heel, he put his back against it, and said—"Well?"

The woman rose and poured forth a flood of Italian, from which Borovitchi could only make out that she had made an unsuccessful attempt to carry out her instructions, that she was suspected and was fleeing for her life, and that she wanted money.

"Stop!" said the Count; and having turned the key in the lock behind his back, he went and sat down opposite her.

"Now, begin at the beginning, and tell me what has occurred," said he. "And speak in French, or in English. I can't make out half of what you say."

By dint of patient listening and a few questions Borovitchi was soon in possession of the facts.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked sharply.

"What do I want? Money, of course. I must be in France as soon as possible."

"Nothing of the kind. You will go back to Lobieski's, and go on staying there, as if nothing had happened."

"Sapristi! I will not! Do you want me to be taken to prison and made convict? I must leave England."

"Well, do so. I shall give you no money, however, if you disobey my instructions. Where do you propose to go? Who will help you? Will you go to Liposi, and appeal for aid to your late husband's relations.

The Italian turned deathly pale, and fixed her cruel eyes full on her master. As the count knew, the woman had been tried for the murder of her husband by poison, and barely escaped conviction. Indeed his employment of her was based on his knowledge of that fact.

"You are a devil!" she said, through her teeth.

"Perhaps," said the Count, "but the remark is irrelevant. The question is, what you mean to do. You have no friends, no trade, no money. Believe me, you had better go back to the Manor House.

"Then I am lost!" cried Madame Fabrini, clasping her hands."

"Nothing of the sort. Don't you see that our interests are the same, and that if anything were to come out, we would be in the same boat? But we are absolutely safe."

"That doctor frightened me. I know he suspects."

"Let him suspect! He can prove nothing. If he had found the scent-bottle in the room on Tuesday night, it might have been different. But there is no longer a possibility of anybody being able to prove that the broken scent-bottle contained anything hurtful. And if there were any danger, don't you see that the worst thing you can possibly do is to try to escape? It is, in fact, proclaiming yourself guilty; whereas, if you go back to the Manor House this afternoon, no one can possibly harm you. You acted like a fool to throw the fragments of the broken scent-bottle out of the window; but you must of course say that you broke it by accident a fortnight ago. Who is there to contradict you? Pooh! I am surprised that you, a sensible, resolute woman, should allow yourself to be frightened by shadows."

The woman was evidently half-convinced, and Borovitchi watched her with affected indifference, but secret anxiety. He had engaged her to act as a spy upon Eli Lobieski, and had himself recommended her to the Jew. If she were to disappear suddenly, for some unexplained reason, it would infallibly cause the Jew to suspect him. And it would be impossible for him to replace her. He could not venture to recommend another person as a member of Lobieski's household.

"Take my advice," he said; "go back at once, and I pledge you my word that no harm can possibly come to

you. And"—he dropped his voice somewhat—"as you have now proved your value, I will ask the office to make a slight increase in your pay. But if you throw up your employment"—a shrug of the Count's shoulders completed the sentence.

Madame Fabrini had no alternative but to obey her taskmaster. She said she would return to the Manor House, and left at once. Borovitchi went back to the dining-room,

For some minutes the Count remained sitting motionless before the fire. For the first time he realised what it was he had attempted to do; and for the time, at all events, he felt glad that fate had stepped in to prevent his becoming a murderer. It was a relief to know that, guilty as he was, in act as well as intention, Ursula Beritza still lived.

It was not all at once that Peter Borovitchi had become vile. Pride and disinclination for work, joined with poverty, had driven him into the ranks of the disaffected. But he soon saw that the days of Polish patriotism were over, and he then became a Nihilist.

Without principles and without money, he fell an easy prey to the temptations placed before him by the Russian police. He had not in so many words denounced his cousins to the Government; but he had been unable to shut his eyes to the advantage which might accrue to

him from the ruin of the Beritza family; and he had held his tongue when a word of warning would have saved Alexis from lifelong imprisonment. If it was not an actual betrayal, it amounted to very much the same thing.

One thing might have saved the Count. When Ursula came home from school it occurred to him that it might not be a bad move for him to marry her. Her dowry, though not large, would have enabled him to live in tolerable comfort. And the girl herself gave promise of great beauty. But the Count soon found, to his chagrin, that the young unformed girl was not in the least flattered by his attentions, More than that, she took no pains to conceal her dislike for him.

The consequence was, the Count's incipient love rapidly changed into something very like hatred. He could have wished that she had been the one to go to Siberia, while Alexis and he spent the revenues of the estate in Paris. And when he understood that this girl, whom he already hated, was the only obstacle that stood in the way of his obtaining a grant of the Beritza estates from the Emperor, his exasperation was so great that he had actually plotted against her life. But, bad as he was, he could not feel sorry that the plot had failed.

"If I could get rid of that minx in some other way—if I could ship her off to the East Indies or marry her to a costermonger!" he said to himself, as he rose and fell

to pacing the room once more. "But it is evident that I cannot play the bold game a second time, and unless fortune favours me in some unexpected way, she must remain as an obstacle in my path. Happily, I have another route to fortune—another string to my bow."

The Count was still busy with such thoughts when a card was handed to him upon which he read the name

FRANK BICKERSTETH.

"Ask the gentleman to step in," he said to the servant. "At least an hour too soon! Confound the fellow!" he added, under his breath. But he greeted his visitor with a well-bred smile and a few words of sham cordiality.

The new comer was a young man, dressed with extreme care. He was immensely tall—so tall that Borovitchi, who was above the average height, looked short beside him—loose jointed, rather slow in his movements, with a ruddy complexion, a long fair moustache as soft as silk, and dreamy blue eyes. His manners were gentle; but there was an expression of firmness about the lower part of his face that hindered one from setting him down as a milksop. He was only twenty-three; and his easy-going, unsuspecting nature made it easy for a man like Borovitchi to do what he liked with him.

"You promised to take me to call on the Baroness this afternoon," said Frank Bickersteth, with a fine flush on his ingenuous countenance, almost before he had taken his seat.

"The Baroness? What Baroness? Oh, yes, I remember. I shall be most happy. We are too soon, however. We can't call until after lunch."

"It is half-past one now," said the young Englishman, glancing at his watch with an air of anxiety. "It will be after two before we get there. If we put it off any longer, she may have gone out."

"My dear fellow, we can't present ourselves before three. Take a cigar, and make yourself at home here for an hour. I assure you there's plenty of time."

But the young fellow was too impatient to smoke. His heart was in a flame. He could barely pay attention to what Borovitchi was saying to him.

With a look of amused contempt on his face, the Count at last threw away his cigarette, and prepared to accompany his friend.

Half-an-hour later, the two men entered a very small but beautifully furnished drawing-room, in a street which bordered on the fashionable quarter of London. A lady who had been lying at full length on a couch rose into a sitting position as they entered.

"Don't rise, Baroness, I beg of you," cried the Count, hastening forward. "I have ventured to bring with me a friend—Mr. Frank Bickersteth—the Baroness von Schöffer."

Frank advanced and bowed as if he been saluting an empress. The Baroness, without troubling herself to get



up from her couch, gave him her hand with a smile of welcome. Small wonder that poor Frank was bewitched. She was wonderfully beautiful. One more experienced than he would have seen that youth and the Baroness had parted company for some time; but she was still as lovely as she had ever been. Her complexion was so transparent that her face seemed to shine. It was as if an angel had visited the green earth—so, at least, it seemed to the enamoured Englishman, as he feasted his hungry eyes on her face. Her hair was of a rich gold colour, and her eyes were a deep liquid brown. The combination is always remarkable, but when joined to beauty of contour it is fascinating.

"Sit down, Mr. Bickersteth," she said, with the prettiest foreign accent imaginable. "I want to hear all about your delightful England. But why are you in London? Is not this the season when you hunt the fox?"

Frank sat down, and tried to satisfy her curiosity. He had just entered his name he said, at one of the Inns of Court, and was supposed to be studying law. Like all young men, and a good many old men, Frank liked to talk about himself; and to talk about himself and his prospects to the Baroness was enchanting. Before many minutes had gone by the Count remembered an important engagement in a street near at hand; and asked if he might keep his appointment and return to Frank in a quarter of an hour. The arrangement seemed to suit all parties.

When Borovitchi came back the Baroness and Frank were still talking, and they did not seem to know that the Count had been absent for nearly an hour. The lady had by that time learned as much about Frank, his family, and his position in society, as she cared to know; and Frank had been offered and had accepted an invitation to dine with the Baroness and her chaperon that day week, and afterwards go with them to the theatre.

When Bickersteth left the house he was in a silent transport of delight, and bade his friend adieu with many expressions of gratitude.

"So far, good," said the Count to himself, as he walked back to his lodgings. "The young fool is evidently as deep in love as he can be. I ought to be able to make the running with *la belle cousine* after this. I think I shall succeed in making her care for me. Still, those English girls are peculiar. It may fall through; and in that case I must get rid of that chit who stands between me and the Beritza property. There must be some way—some safe plan, if I could only think of one. By and bye perhaps I may."



CHAPTER VI

In Secret Conclave

Count Borovitchi did not remain long in his rooms. In spite of the weather—for it was a bleak raw day, with a bitter east wind—he set off almost immediately for a quiet street in the district of Soho, called by some irony of fate Paradise Place. Having reached it, he stopped at No. 16, a plain gloomy house of the usual London type and knocked twice. The door was opened instantly, and the Count stepped into a dark ill-smelling passage. Giving a nod to the woman who had admitted him he went upstairs, and stopped outside a room on the first floor. Listening for moment, he heard a subdued hum of voices. He then opened the door and went in.

It was a tolerably large room, dimly lighted by two small gas-jets. A table in the centre occupied the greater part of the space. Round this table, and round a smouldering fire, seven or eight men were lounging.

The air was thick from the smoke of cigarettes and rank cigars, reinforced by some smoke from the chimney.

As the Count entered most of the men rose. One, however, retained his seat, and gravely held out his hand to the new comer. This was an old man who sat at the large centre table, a little apart from the others. His features were of a decidedly Jewish cast. He wore neither beard nor whiskers; and he seemed to have little or no need for a razor. His face was as smooth as a girl's; and his long grey hair hung down well over his ears. His eyes were bluish, remarkably clear and bright.

"Ah my dear Lobieski," said the Count, "you are before me, I see. I hope you are well?"

The Jew returned this greeting politely, but without any effusion; and taking out a large old-fashioned watch, he said: "It is time we began our sitting. Where is Dimitrieff? Has any one seen him?"

Just then a short, pale, thin man entered the room. He wore no overcoat, but a black frock coat of inferior quality tightly buttoned across his chest. His hair had evidently not been cut for some time, and his face, without being positively dirty, somehow gave one the impression that his ablutions were strictly limited in area.

"You are late, Mr. Secretary." said the Jew.

"Pardon me, sir, and you, my friends," said Dimitrieff. "I was here five minutes ago, but as a policeman was



passing at the time I thought it better that he should not see me enter the house."

"You did well," said Lobieski; and he gave two sharp raps with his knuckles on the table. The others immediately took their places. There were ten in all.

It was a meeting of the Committee of the English Branch of the Nihilist Society.

Lobieski, the president, slowly rose from his seat, and said, looking at Count Borovitchi, who sat opposite to him—

"Our first business is to receive reports of the progress in our propaganda that has been made since our last monthly meeting. Count Borovitchi, I call on you to say what has been done lately in the department of literature."

Without troubling himself to rise, the Count leant forward in his seat, and said—

"The idea of printing in secret ink, which I had the honour of proposing two months ago, has been successfully carried out. Here is a specimen." He drew from his breast pocket a sheet of thin paper, about the size of an old-fashioned sheet of letter paper; it was handed round the table. "You will see that three sides are occupied with an advertisement of French gloves. The fourth side seems to be blank; but you have only to hold it to the fire, and the usual monthly communication from the Central Committee will appear in brownish ink."

A murmur of approval ran round the room.

"If a list of the names and addresses to whom the paper is to be forwarded were sent to the printing office," observed Count Borovitchi, "the circulars could be posted direct from England. It seems to me that this would be much safer than sending them in bulk to Russia."

"I hardly think so," said the Jew, in a gentle tone. "It appears to me that foreign letters would be more likely to attract attention in the Russian Post Office. Besides"—he stole a glance at the Count as he said this—"besides, the Committee prefer to keep the list of members in their own hands."

Borovitchi made no reply.

"Has any missive been sent direct to the Czar this month?" asked a member.

"No," answered the secretary, who had not yet spoken. "That is a most difficult and dangerous service, as of course the letter must be placed in his dressing room, or on his writing table, so as to ensure its reaching him. We cannot expect to do a thing like that every day."

"How are the funds?" asked another member.

"We have sufficient," answered Lobieski. "The fund in our hands has increased largely of late, as you all know, on account of the Central Committee preferring to keep a considerable part of their money in this country. The securities have been duly inspected, and the monthly accounts have been audited. The papers are here."

"There is one point to which I wish to refer," said



Count Borovitchi, rising for the first time, and pushing back his chair. "I yield to no brother in my detestation of the common enemy, and in my enthusiasm for the cause. But I confess I am beginning to grow tired of working so much in the dark. It seems to me that we, the expatriated members, are not sufficiently trusted. We receive orders and obey them. That is all."

A hum arose from the table, which showed that the speaker had the support of several of his fellow conspirators.

"I consider—and I fancy I am not quite alone in my opinion—that we have proved our devotion to the cause of liberty sufficiently to be trusted at least with the names of those whom we have hitherto blindly obeyed. It is not much to ask. I propose that a request of this nature be forwarded from us to the Central Committee."

There was a silence, and all eyes were turned upon Eli Lobieski.

The old man slowly rose from his chair, and fixed his keen eyes on the count.

"It pains me," he began, "to be compelled to differ from brother Borovitchi. But in this case I must. The request he makes, and which some of you, I daresay, think reasonable, would, if granted, mean a revolution in our society. Every secret society since the world began has been betrayed—except our own."

An indignant murmur rose from the table.

"Of course, I do not mean for an instant to insinuate that there is a traitor among us. As the Count has reminded you, we have proved our devotion, some by imprisonment, some by forfeiture of nearly all they possessed, some by daring deeds done for the cause of a free Poland and a free Russia. But we have not merely ourselves to consider. Changes must occur in our number. What guarantee have we that those who may succeed us will prove to be—I will not say as faithful, for that we all expect—but as prudent as we have hitherto shown ourselves?

"No, my friends. Under the invincible shield of a secret central authority we have done great things. We have made the world wonder, and have compelled the tyrant to tremble. Let us not abandon the security we have hitherto enjoyed. Let us not seek to know more than the good of the cause requires us to know. Let us not open a door through which an enemy may come in."

Lobieski looked Count Borovitchi full in the face, and sat down.

A deep silence followed his words. No one broke it till the Count said, in a tone of indifference,—

"As our respected chief has so strong an opinion on the subject we had better say no more about it for the present. I withdraw the proposal I have just made."

"If I may say so, Count, you have done well," said the Jew, in a voice of mingled humility and firmness. "As



it happens, the Central Committee have just given us a marked proof of their confidence. But I see that Ivan Goloffski is anxious to speak. What is it, Ivan?"

A short thickset man, with a mass of tangled red-brown hair, rose, and leaning his hands heavily on the table in front of him, began to speak in the Russian tongue. His voice was low, so low that those a few feet away had to bend forward to listen. His utterances were thick and laboured. Sometimes he was forced to stop. Every now and then he trembled, so that he could hardly stand.

"Where are they?" those present heard him say—"Where are they, my wife and my son? Still in prison at Birtova. They have not yet been sent on to the mines. They eat mouldy bread with a little coarse salt fish. They are crowded together with scores of other wretches in dens not fit to be cowhouses. They are weak from want of food and rest, and cannot do their tasks. Then they are beaten. The knout eats their flesh. If they complain, there are curses, blows, mock trials for insubordination. The commandant, Ivanieff, is still there. He is the cause of all the misery."

Then came a series of anecdotes of the inhumanity and callous cruelty of the Governor of the prison, given with such detail that Count Borovitchi, as he listened, became convinced that one of the warders must have given the information

"How long is this to go on, my brothers, how long?" The Russian's speech ended in a smothered sob, and he sat down.

"Not much longer!" cried the Jew, springing to his feet.

"I told you," he continued, "that the Central Committee have given us a signal proof of their confidence. It is now under our roof. They have considered the report of Maria and Alexis Goloffski's case which we submitted to them. They have warned Ivanieff, and he has treated the warning with contempt. He has, therefore, been condemned."

A cry of delight burst from Goloffski's lips. He was sitting like one in an ecstasy, his eyes fixed on the speaker's face.

"He has been condemned, I say, subject to our approval. For it is to us that the Central Committee has delegated the task of seeing that the sentence is carried into effect."

A death-like stillness followed these words.

"As you are aware," went on Lobieski, "we cannot pronounce a death sentence except under the authority of the Symbol of our Revolt."

"But it is in Russia," interposed some one.

"It is here!" cried the Jew, in a voice which caused his hearers to start. He touched a man near him on the shoulder, and the man left the room, returning in a few moments followed by a tall fellow in the dress of a Russian peasant. This person carried before him a box



of some dark wood about twenty inches long. All present rose to their feet; and the box was carefully deposited in the centre of the large table.

In solemn silence the custodian of the box, who was a stranger to all present, took out a key, suspended by a steel chain from his neck, and opened the box. From it he first took a folded garment, which, when unrolled, proved to be one of the coarse tunics worn by Russian convicts. This was spread upon the table; and then the stranger lifted something heavy out of the box and laid it on the prison dress.

It was a broken fetter.

The link had been filed through, and the two halves were there, opposite each other—a speaking symbol of ruthless tyranny and victorious defiance! To one of the links the staple by which it had been fixed to the wall was still hanging. The ankle-ring was joined to the other half of the link; its edges were worn smooth with long chafing of human flesh.

For some moments the conspirators stood gazing, in perfect silence, on the dread object which to them stood for crown and sceptre and sword of state, now beheld by them for the first time.

"Brothers," said Lobieski, in a voice hoarse with emotion, "you have been told of the enormities of which the commandant Ivanieff has been guilty. It is for you to decide upon his fate."

The man who had summoned the messenger from the Central Committee now presented to each of the Nihilists two plates, upon one of which were several white beans, while on the other were a number of black ones. Each of the conspirators took one white bean and one black one. Then the secretary approached Lobieski, holding out to him a small bag of black cloth. The Jew stretched out his left hand, and placed it on the broken fetter. With the other he dropped one bean into the bag. Each in turn followed his example. With one hand placed on the instrument and symbol of oppression, each man gave his vote for life or death.

During this time not a word was uttered. When the last vote was given, the secretary carried the bag to Lobieski, who emptied it upon the table. The beans were, without exception, black.

No comment was made. Nothing else had been expected.

Lobieski took a small piece of paper from his pocket. It was already covered with writing, but he added a word or two, and affixed his initials.

"One of us, he said, in a grave tone, "must carry out this decree. Here is the warrant." He placed it under a large volume which lay on a side-table. "It will remain here until the brother who requires it chooses to remove it. He will leave it upon or near the body of the miscreant who is to be put to death, as his and our justification."



In the sight of all Dimitrieff placed a number of beans in the black bag, corresponding to the number of conspirators, all of them being white except one.

As he was doing this Count Borovitchi drew from his pocket a silver vesta-box, and bending forward as if to watch more carefully what was being done, he quietly deposited the vesta-box on the floor, and pushed it with his foot underneath the table.

When the beans had been put into the bag the Secretary carried it round, and each man took out one bean. It was understood that he who drew the black bean must be the executioner.

When each of the conspirators had plunged his hand into the bag, Dimitrieff turned it outside in, to show that it was empty. Each man put the bean he had drawn into his pocket without looking at it, for it was one of the rules that no one except the Chief should know the person upon whom the lot had fallen.

The broken fetter and the stained and worn livery of the prison-house were replaced in the receptacle provided for them, and carried away. Then, still in silence, those present began to disperse.

One of them, Ivan Goloffski, walking rapidly away, stopped at the first lamp-post—for it was now dark—opened his clenched hand, saw a white bean, and threw it away with a curse.

Another of the party, Count Borovitchi, walked on

for five minutes before he had the courage to look at the tiny object which he carried in his waistcoat pocket. At length he stopped short, and drew out the bean. It was black.



CHAPTER VII

Double Dealing

Count Borovitchi looked for some moments at the token of death as it lay in his hand. A contemptuous smile came into his face, and he made a movement as if he would throw the black bean into the roadway. Then checking himself, he replaced it in his pocket.

"It is as well I hit upon that little ruse," he said to himself, "for getting a peep at the death warrant as they call it. But I did not suppose I should want to make use of it on my own account."

He retraced his steps, and slowly walked back to the house he had just left.

"It is hardly likely that any one will be there just now," he reflected. "But I must take the risk of that."

The door was opened by an elderly woman. Borovitchi stepped into the passage, and closed the door behind him.



"Katrinka," he said, speaking in Polish, the woman's native tongue," I have lost a silver vesta-box. I think I may have dropped it upstairs. Is any one there now?"

"No one, sir. The room is empty, and the gas has been put out."

"Then, will you get a candle and look for it?"

The woman went for a light, and the Count waited for her in the passage.

"I will wait here for you," he said to her, when she re-appeared. She threw open the door of a small, poorly furnished parlour, and he entered and sat down. To Katrinka, accustomed to the habits of Russian grandees, it seemed in no way surprising that the Count should prefer to sit down and wait, and employ her to search for his vesta-box, rather than go upstairs and hunt for it himself.

But as soon as the sound of the woman's footsteps on the uncarpeted stairs had ceased, Borovitchi left the room and stealthily but rapidly stole upstairs. He knew that Katrinka was rather hard of hearing.

A light shone from the open door of the large sitting-room. Looking through the crack of the door, the Count saw Katrinka with the candle in her hand moving about. He waited until she went down on her knees, as he felt sure she would do, to look for the vesta-box; and then, when her head was under the table, with noiseless steps he covered the few paces that separated him from



the side table, upon which the decree of the Central Committee was lying. In another second he had the paper in his hand; and by the time that Katrinka emerged from beneath the table with the fusee-box in her hand, Borovitchi had escaped from the room. When she went downstairs, she found him sitting quietly where she had left him.

Handing Katrinka a shilling for her trouble, the Count took the vesta-box, and left the house. His object had been accomplished. Katrinka, if questioned (as he felt sure she would be), would unhesitatingly deny that he had been in the Committee-room since he had left the house with the others.

Borovitchi now walked rapidly to the nearest thoroughfare, and calling a hansom he drove to an hotel in a quiet street in the West End. Here he asked for Colonel Brinski; and when the hall-porter paused politely the Count gave him a card which did not bear the name of Borovitchi, but which had a mark like the letter S faintly traced in one corner.

After a minute or two he was shown into a handsome sitting-room, where a man of colossal size was busily writing at a table in front of the fire. This was Colonel Brinski, one of the chief officers of the Russian secret police.

The Colonel barely looked up when the Count entered; he said nothing, but nodded, and pointing to an easy-chair

at the fireside went on with his writing. A look that the official would not have been pleased to see flashed from the Count's dark eyes; but he crossed the room in silence, took the chair indicated, and waited.

"Pouf! That is done!" cried the Colonel; and suddenly throwing his pen over his shoulder, he pushed away his papers and wheeled round so as to face his visitor. In spite of his immense bulk the Russian was full of energy. Every movement was alert, every word he uttered told of decision and of power.

"Well, what news have you for me to-night?"

For answer Count Borovitchi took out the decree of the Central Committee, and after glancing over it placed it in the hands of his chief.

"What is this?"

"A death warrant."

"What!"

Cool and determined as he was, Colonel Brinski started in his chair.

"A death-warrant," replied Borovitichi, "issued under the sign and seal of the Central Committee, and duly ratified, you will observe, by the English Branch Committee."

"The victom, I see, is Ivanieff, an invaluable man, an old friend of my own. The miscreants! I will warn Ivanieff, and the ruffian will be caught in the act, with this precious death warrant in his possession."



"Hardly," said the Count, with a grim smile.

"Why not?"

"Because the ruffian deputed to carry out this decree happens to be—your humble servant."

"What—YOU?"

The Colonel burst into a roar of laughter, and laughed so loud and so long that he did not notice how the Count's face was darkening. To him it seemed exquisitely funny that this well-born spy should be expected to play the part of assassin.

Suddenly he became grave.

"Does this mean, Borovitchi, that they suspect you, and mean to put your fidelity to the test?"

"Not at all. The choice was made by drawing lots."

"Well, what do you mean to do?"

"Ivanieff must be moved elsewhere; that's all."

"Yes, I suppose there is no help for it," said the Russian slowly.

"No one knows as yet," said Borovitchi, "that the lot has fallen upon me; but I must tell Lobieski sooner or later. I had better go to Birtova, or pretend to do so; but the Governor must have left for some unknown region before I arrive."

"Why not deny that you drew the unlucky number, or whatever it was?"

"Because it would then be plain to everybody that there was one of our number who could not be relied

upon, and they would never rest till they had discovered the black sheep."

"True. Well, it shall be as you say. But tell me, are you any nearer the main object?"

"You mean putting my finger on the hand that guides the whole machine? Not yet. I am convinced of two things—that the General is not in England—I even think he is in Russia—and that not one of the conspirators in this country, unless (possibly) Lobieski, knows so much as his name."

"Did you do as I—suggested?"

"Yes; and I am sorry I took your advice," retorted the Count.

The Colonel looked at him.

"If you mean to give me orders as to details," went on the Count, "of course I will carry them out—and leave the service."

"You dare not do that!"

"Oh, dear, yes! I am in England. But we need not wrangle over it. Let me tell you what happened. I first of all secured the support of several members of the Committee, and then demanded that we should know the names of our leaders. Lobieski opposed my motion, as I may call it, and he looked at me in such a meaning way, that, anxious to ward off his suspicions, I was glad to withdraw my proposal. But you have only to wait. I will soon attain such a position in the society that



the knowledge I seek cannot be kept back from me."

"It will be a great service, and the reward will, no doubt, be proportionately great," said the Colonel.

"It ought to be; but there is another reward that ought of right to be granted at once."

"You mean possession of the estates of your—what shall I call him?—unfortunate cousin?"

"You know I do. Have you enquired for me, as you promised to do?"

"I have."

"And the answer?"

"The answer is, that the convict's sister has done nothing to forfeit her claim to the estates, I may as well tell you that the Government has decided to make a grant of them to her on condition of her returning to Russia when she is of age. But, my dear Count, why not marry the young lady? You know where she is to be found, I presume. Marry her, and the estates shall be yours."

A certain tremor passed over Borovitchi's mouth, and his eyes fell.

"No," he said shortly; "the young lady detests me. She would as soon marry—never mind. I see I must have patience." He rose from his seat, and took up his hat. "By the way," he said, "couldn't you give them a hint to be a little less severe in the discipline at Birtova? If not, we shall have all this fuss over again."

"My dear fellow," said the Colonel, shrugging his

shoulders, "what would you have? Those things must be left to the officers in charge. There is a good deal of corruption—stealing the money sent for the prisoners' food, and so on—I admit. But after all, what does it matter to us? That does not concern our department; and you can hardly be deputed by lot to assassinate a man a second time. That would be too deuced unlucky."

There was a tone of irony in this speech that the Count bitterly resented; but he said nothing.

"Going? Well, good-night," said Colonel Brinski; "and don't forget to send me a proof copy of the French Kid Glove Company's circular. Capital idea that of yours. Ha! Ha!"

Brinski barely touched his hand the Count offered him. As soon as the visitor had left the room he threw the window wide open, as if to free it from a polluted atmosphere.



CHAPTER VIII

A Random Word

On her way back to London from the Old Manor House Ursula remembered that she could not spend the evening at her own fireside as she would have liked to do. She was engaged to go to an "At Home" at the house of a London banker named Bickersteth, who lived at Dollis Hill. This gentleman was Frank Bickersteth's uncle, and had till recently been his guardian, for Frank was an orphan. It was impossible for Ursula to avoid going, for she had accepted an invitation to sleep at Dollis Hall (as the banker had called his house), and besides, Maud, Mr. Bickersteth's only child, was not merely her pupil, but her special friend. So about eight in the evening Ursula's cab was crawling up the avenue that led from the high road to the banker's house.

She was throwing off her wraps in a small room that

opened off the hall, when Maud rushed into the room and threw her arms round her.

"Here you are at last, you darling," she cried impulsively. "I was afraid you were ill, or something of that kind. Why didn't you come yesterday?"

"I have not been well," said Ursula, as she kissed her friend.

"Perhaps you ought not to have come out to-night," said the other.

"Oh yes; I am all right again." As Ursula said this she drew back a step and looked steadily in Maud Bickersteth's face. It was not exactly a beautiful face, and yet it was fair to see. A quantity of fair hair, turned back so as to display the wide low forehead, kindly grey eyes, a firm but gentle mouth—these were the best features of her face. Her expression was altogether charming. Candour and kindheartedness shone in her smile. It was easy to see that it would take a great deal to ruffle the calm serenity of her nature, and that nothing would make her do a mean or underhand action. The two girls were a complete contrast—Ursula pale, slight, nervous, sensitive, daring; Maud large of feature, large of limb, large of heart, self-controlled, benignant, English to the tips of her large but well-shaped fingers.

"Why do you look at me like that?" said Maud, laughing and laying her arm affectionately on the foreign girl's shoulder.



"I was thinking," said Ursula, gravely—"I was thinking how nice-looking you are, how good, and how happy! Your life is secure, like that of the saints in Paradise! It is spent in simple duties, innocent pleasures. Pain and unhappiness are as far removed from you as poverty, or sickness, or death. You remind me of what your English poet who loved freedom says to the skylark—'Shadow of annoyance never came near thee.'"

While Ursula had been speaking Maud's face had become paler.

"But you do not think me heartless, I hope?" she said, in a half-whisper.

"No, no! Not heartless! Have you not been like a sister to me, a stranger and an exile?"

"Sometimes," said Maud, "I think of the king of ancient history—was it Cyrus-?—who was so happy, so fortunate in all that he did, that he feared some great disaster would befall him to restore the balance, as it were. So he consulted an oracle, and in obedience to the answer he received he threw the most precious thing he possessed, a ring of priceless value, into the sea—"

"Oh, I know," interrupted Ursula, anxious to scatter the gloomy apprehension she had called up. "A fisherman caught a big fish, and sent it to the king. He had it for dinner; and the ring turned up inside the fish. And of course the king gave himself up for lost; and of course

something dreadful happened. It sounds more like a story out of the Arabian Nights than one out of history. Surely you don't imagine that because you are happy you are bound to be miserable? I had no idea you were so superstitious."

"I don't know," said Maud, absently looking into the fire. "I ought to be a happy girl, and I believe I am, and yet—come, dear," she broke off hastily. "People may arrive now at any time. Papa is in the drawing-room—and Frank."

A certain softening of her tone, as the girl pronounced her cousin's name, was noticed by Ursula's sensitive ear. She glanced at her friend, but Maud's face was serene and calm as usual. More than once she had fancied that Maud had a secret, but nothing had been said between them on the subject.

The drawing-room, large, and handsomely furnished, was shining with the soft, subdued radiance of several hundred wax-candles. Maud would have nothing to do with gas and hated the cold glare of the electric light, while her father liked brilliance, and the result was an extravagant but beautiful display. Mr. Bickersteth, short, stout, red-jowled clead-shaven, his scanty grey hair neatly arranged over the top of his head, came forward from his post in front of the fire when the two girls came in, and shook hands with Ursula in a kindly but patronising way. As he did so, Frank Bickersteth raised his tall

form from the low easy-chair in which he had been lounging, and greeted her in a rather nonchalant fashion.

"Won't you help me to put out some music, Frank?" said Maud; and he obediently followed her to the music-cabinet. The two were arranging some music—in perfect silence, as Ursula noticed—when the door was thrown open, and the first arrivals made their appearance. From that moment the stream of guests was continuous, and in less than half-an-hour the large room was filled.

The music began with a duet on the grand piano, and when it was over Ursula, from her retired seat behind a group of dowagers, saw Frank's tall form move through the crowd. He was going to welcome a friend who had just arrived. From mere idle curiosity Ursula moved a little in her seat, so that she could see round Frank's right arm. She saw a group of black-coated men separate, and one among them come forward smilingly and holding out his hand.

It was Count Borovitchi.

Ursula started violently, and turned pale. She need not have been surprised. Any one may be encountered in a London drawing-room; but the girl felt uneasy and alarmed. Could it be possible, she wondered, that the Count had discovered that she came to Dollis Hall every Monday, and had obtained an invitation in order to

put himself in her way? A moment's reflection showed her the absurdity of that idea; but she could not banish from her mind a feeling of apprehension. Her uppermost feeling was a desire to conceal herself—to prevent, if possible, the Count from knowing that she was in the habit of coming to the house. Sheltered by two portly matrons Ursula bent down over a book of photographs, and felt tolerably secure. The room was so large, and the crowd was so great, that unless she were asked to play or sing no one was likely to observe her.

By and by, however, Maud came up to her, and asked her if she would come nearer to the piano.

"I want," she said, "to introduce to you a fellow-countryman of yours who is here to-night."

Without allowing her friend time to reply, Maud turned away and returned a few moment's later, leaning on Borovitchi's arm. In spite of his natural and habitual self-command, the Count started when he caught sight of his cousin; but Maud was looking at Ursula, and did not notice it. The introduction was performed; and Maud, saying laughingly that she had no doubt they would find plenty of un-English things to talk about, left them together.

The Count was forced to sit down by the girl whom he had so nearly done to death a few days before. Some one began to sing, and he was not sorry for the respite. He hardly understood from Ursula's manner while the

introduction was being performed whether she meant to ignore the relationship between them, and treat him as a stranger, or not. She had said nothing to Maud; but there had hardly been time for explanations. He resolved to "play low," and follow Ursula's lead.

It was the first time Ursula had been brought face to face with Borovitchi since they had met in the little village church with her father's dead body between them. She, too, was glad of the five minute's breathing-time. It was long enough for her to remember that it was of the first importance that Borovitchi should remain in ignorance of her suspicions. But beyond that she could decide upon nothing.

The song ended; and as soon as the decorous murmur that followed had died away, Ursula heard her cousin's soft musical voice saying to her, in a sympathetic half-whisper,—

"Have you heard any news of poor Alexis lately?"

The girl started, and stared at her questioner. He was puzzled by her look, and indeed it had all but betrayed the secret feeling in her mind. What she was saying to herself was "It is impossible that this man, if he were a traitor, could have put such a question as that!" Her heart was too full to answer in words. She shook her head in silence. But she had nearly uttered a low wail of anguish, for in her mind's eye she saw her brother lying on a pallet bed in a dark and narrow cell, hungry,

shivering with cold, hopeless, waiting for the inevitable end.

"You were not kept in prison long," she said after a few moments.

"No," said the Count," with a trace of eagerness in his manner, as if he were glad of an opportunity of explaining. "You see, they had really no evidence against me, and after the authorities let me out to attend your father's funeral, they did not think it worth while to re-arrest me. With your poor brother it was different. He would keep compromising papers in his desk, often as I warned him. But let me ask you, cousin, how is it that you are in England?

"Did you not know I was in London?" asked the girl quietly.

"I? Certainly not. I heard you had left Beritza. That was all."

"I was advised by the same malignant—that I was safer in England."

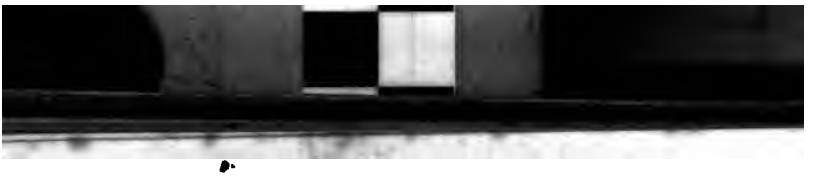
The Count laughed.

"Safer! You would be safe enough in St. Petersburg. *You* have not been plotting against the Government."

He remained in silence for a few moments, as if meditating; and then said,—

"Indeed I think you were badly advised—that it was a mistake for you to leave Russia, and that the sooner you return the better."

"Do you think so?"



"I do And men more experienced than I will tell you the same thing. What are you here? An exile, friendless, and—well, not rich. But if you went back to Beritza, and the Government were assured of your loyalty, the Czar might re-grant the estates to you. It seems to me to be throwing away your future to remain here. Then again, as a rich and loyal subject of the Czar, the representative of one of our historic houses, you might be able to do something for your brother, perhaps eventually obtain his release, on condition of his leaving Russia It seems to me such a mistake for you to live out of the country."

It sounded so rational, so plausible, that Ursula was half convinced that her suspicions had been unfounded.

Before she had time to think what she ought to say in reply, Maud turned to them, and begged them to sing together a song of their own country. The cry of Ursula's heart was that of the captive Israelites—"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" She knew that if she were to force herself to begin one of the national ballads she could never finish it; and she begged Maud to excuse her. But the Count had no such scruples; and soon the first notes of a song which he had often sung in the drawing-room of the Castle of Beritza fell on her ear. The familiar words she did not hear, for Borovitchi used an English translation; but the spirit-



stirring tune was the same, and as the Count's rich tenor voice poured out the refrain—

Seized for plunder,
Torn asunder,
Trampled under,
Poland! Thou shalt yet be free!

the girls heart swelled within her; and again the doubt returned to her mind that she must have been suspecting her cousin unjustly.

For the rest of the evening she avoided him; but in the course of the hour or two that remained she learned a fact that surprised her. Count Borovitchi was, or pretended to be, in love with Maud Bickersteth. His manner, though well-bred and perfectly respectful, was full of a subdued earnestness when he addressed her. He seized every opportunity of being near her, and tried to monopolise her attention as much as he could. Ursula would have been alarmed on Maud's account, but she had long suspected that the girl had fixed her affections on her cousin Frank; and this, she thought, would be a sufficient defence against the Count's advances.

It was late when Ursula was able to retire that night; and before she slept her mind was filled with the doubts that her cousin's conversation had suggested to her Was she wrong in suspecting him? Was he really innocent of any share in her brother's ruin? Had her illness been merely a prolonged fainting fit, arising from natural



causes? Ought she to give up her designs against the Count, ask his advice, and go back to Poland to her own people?

To these questions she could find no satisfactory answer. They tormented her till she fell asleep, and confronted her when she opened her eyes in the morning.

Strangely enough (as it seemed to her), the first words she heard when she entered the breakfast room related to her cousin.

"I own I am prejudiced against foreigners, Frank," Mr. Bickersteth was saying. "I have lost too much money by them to be very fond of them. But that's nothing. All I ask is—Who is this Count Borovitchi? Is he a Count at all, in the first place?"

Ursula's entrance hardly interrupted the conversation, and Frank answered almost at once,—

"Certainly he is, sir. I made enquiries of a man I know attached to the Russian embassy."

"Well, and what is his social standing, apart from his rank? Do people speak well of him? I ask because—" the banker hesitated slightly—"because I find he has been a rather frequent visitor here of late."

"I have known him some weeks, and I think he is a capital fellow," said Frank, warmly. "And De Perrier, whom you know, told me that one day when he went to see Colonel Brinski at his hotel, and walked into his room

without being announced, he found the Colonel and Borovitchi smoking their cigars together in the friendliest manner possible. Now Colonel Brinski is one of the most exclusive men in London. De Perrier says that to know him is as good as a patent of nobility."

The banker seemed satisfied; at any rate he asked no more questions; and Maud's coming into the room turned the conversation into another channel. But Ursula could hardly listen to it, or answer any one who spoke to her. Her heart was beating furiously, and her breath came in short convulsive gasps. For she well knew that this man, this Colonel Brinski with whom Borovitchi was said to be intimate, was formerly the head of the Russian police in the district of Beritza. It was he who had ordered her brother's arrest, he who had consigned Alexis to a fate that was worse than death.



CHAPTER IX

Fortune Favours The Count

Borovitchi returned from Dollis Hill in a state of great self-satisfaction. In the first place he had ascertained (as he believed) that Ursula had no suspicions of his good faith. He attributed it to Lobieski's influence that she had so far kept aloof from him—that she had not given him her address, and asked him to call on her. And in the second place, he knew that he had only to put a question or two to Maud Bickersteth in order to find out where she lived. He would be able to lay his hands on her at any time.

But this was not the chief cause of the Count's agreeable state of mind. Colonel Brinski's remarks had convinced him that Ursula's continued existence was a positive bar to his obtaining possession of her brother's confiscated estates. He was forced, therefore, to build his hopes entirely on the possibility of his making a

wealthy marriage. And Maud, on whom he had fixed his eyes as being in every way suited to his purpose, had been more gracious to him that night than she had ever been before. It never occurred to him—nor, indeed, did Maud herself know—that the favour with which she had received his attentions was due chiefly to an innocent feminine coquetry. Frank had hardly been near her the whole evening; and although he had the excuse that being almost a member of the family (though he lived now in his own chambers in the Temple), it was his duty to devote himself to the guests, Maud did not mind letting him see that if he kept aloof others were ready to pay her court.

Once they had very nearly been lovers, these two; but with a man's natural perverseness Frank had neglected the best thing that his happy fortune had placed within his reach, for no better reason, apparently, than that it was lying ready to his hand. Borovitchi had quickly grasped the situation, and had as quickly taken advantage of it. He saw that he had but small chance of winning the heiress so long as Frank was still unappropriated; but he judged that if her cousin gave her up altogether she would not prove inconsolable. It was with the object of detaching him definitely from Maud that Borovitchi had managed to throw him in the way of his old acquaintance, the Baroness von Schöffer. The simple device had been perfectly successful. The impulsive, hot-blooded fellow had fallen violently in



love with the charming widow. Borovitchi had nothing more to do than to ingratiate himself with the young lady; and in this he thought he had already made very good progress.

He was reviewing the situation after breakfast, on the morning after the party, and planning the details of his next move, when a visitor was announced, who proved to be none other than Lobieski.

"What the devil can the old Jew want with me?" muttered the Count; and then he turned pale. Could it be possible, he wondered, that Lobieski had come to tell him that he suspected Madame Fabrini, and to make some closer enquiries about her?

Nothing, however, appeared to be farther from the old man's mind than this unpleasant subject.

"I came," he said, as soon as he had taken his seat, "to let you know that I leave for Russia today."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; the Central Committee wish to confer with me, as representing the members of our Society in this country. And I wish to see that the Broken Fetter is safely returned to those who have the care of it. I called to let you know that we look to you to take my place during my absence."

"Oh, certainly," returned the Count. Do you intend to be away for any length of time?"

"I cannot say. It may only be for a fortnight—possibly a month."

"I need not say that I trust you will return to us safely."

Lobieski bowed.

"But there is always some risk for any of us who puts his foot on Russian soil."

"True."

"I ought to be able to communicate with the superior office-bearers of the Society—with the Central Committee," said the Count.

It was a good opportunity, Borovitchi thought, for adding another name to his list of prominent Nihilists, and for drawing a step nearer to the discovery of the identity of the person who was really at the head of the whole organisation. But once more his efforts were frustrated.

"It is not necessary," said Lobieski," in a tone of indifference. "Should the occasion arise to make it desirable, the Central Committee will communicate with you."

"All right—very well."

"There is one subject I ought to mention before I go." said the Jew. "The member who drew the fatal lot last night must inform you of the fact instead of me; unless——"

He paused and looked hard at the Count. And in the tenth part of a second Borovitchi recognised that he must either deny that he had drawn the black bean—a



course not unattended with danger—or admit it then and there.

"I am the man," he said, with a smile. "The lot fell to me."

"I thought so," said the Jew.

A change came across the other's face.

"May I ask how you came to think so?" said he.

"Because I have been to the house in Paradise Place, and I find the warrant gone. Now, Katrinka tells me that you returned yesterday afternoon, and although she is positive that you did not go upstairs—"

The Count burst into a laugh—a laugh without much mirth in it.

"It is not difficult to deceive poor old Katrinka," said he. "Yes; I thought it better to possess myself of the paper privately. I did not intend that any one but you should know that I was the person upon whom the lot had fallen."

"Quite right," said Lobieski gravely; and the Count thought to himself—"If I had not drawn the black bean if I had not been the one who had the right to take away the warrant, as they call it—I should have been in a pretty fix."

"May I ask," continued Lobieski, "whether you have formed any plans on that subject—not that you are in any way bound to divulge them to me," he added hastily.



"Oh, it's easy enough," said the Count lightly. "I have nothing to do but to ascertain the locality of this country town, Birtova, and go there. Then I make the acquaintance of the Governor of the prison easily enough, pick a quarrel with him, force him to challenge me, so as to give me the choice of weapons, and then—a bullet at twelve paces. I can hit a shilling at twelve paces, you know."

"That hardly seems satisfactory," said Lobieski. "The death must be known to be an act of reprisal, an execution, else it loses all significance."

"Oh, I shall arrange for the production of the death-warrant—never fear! But only after I am safe across the frontier."

"If you think you are likely to meet with any difficulties in the way of carrying out the order," said Lobieski, speaking slowly, and with a certain hesitation, "I think it might be possible to transfer the duty to Goloffski. I am told that he was much disappointed that the lot did not fall on him. We all know that he has a personal interest in the matter; and the decrees of the Society ought to be carried out by men who are actuated solely by a sense of duty. Still, if you—"

Borovitchi interrupted him. He would have been glad enough to have had the dangerous task given to another from the first; but he reflected that the Russian authorities had, no doubt, already been warned, and that he could hardly give up the post of danger now without



incurring a loss of influence, if not something like suspicion. So he broke in with,—

"Pardon me; you are very good, but I think we ought to abide by the decision which Fortune has made. I have no wish to draw back from any duty that falls to me. I will set out for Birtova in a day or two, and if this fellow Ivanieff is to be found there, I will shoot him down without mercy. The world will be well rid of a monster of inhumanity; and poor Goloffski shall run no risks. He has suffered enough."

Lobieski bowed without speaking; but Borovitchi could tell by his expression that his decision, and the words he had spoken, had left a very favourable impression on the mind of the old man.

"Is it permissible to ask for what part of Russia you are bound?" asked the Count after a pause.

"For St Petersburg."

"Right into the lion's mouth! Is that wise?"

"I think I am tolerably safe. I am not known in the capital."

"Birtova is in the south, I think?"

"In the south-west, not far from the Austrian frontier.

"We are not likely to meet, then?"

"No. But I must go. I leave this afternoon; and I have much to attend to."

"Good-bye, then; and a safe return!" cried the Count; nd so they parted.

The Jew had hardly left the street-door, before Borovitchi sat down at his writing-table, and began a despatch to Colonel Brinski.

"The Jew, Lobieski," wrote the Count, "who is the head of the English Branch of the Society, is just about to start for St. Petersburg. I imagine he intends to be away for some time, (though he did not admit as much to me,) for this reason. He placed me in charge of the affairs of the Society during his absence; and yet he was quite aware that I must be away for some days on my journey—or supposed journey to—Birtova. I think it will be unnecessary for me to go on that tiresome expedition at this season of the year. I shall cross the Channel, so as to throw any members who may be inclined to watch my proceedings off the scent, and remain quietly in Paris, or here in my own comfortable lodgings, for a week or two. Meanwhile, you must be good enough to have Ivanieff transferred elsewhere. It is essential that he should not be at Birtova while I am supposed to be on his track.

"Of course, it is in your power to have Lobieski arrested, if the authorities at St. Petersburg think proper. They will be able to detect him easily at the railway station from the description I have already forwarded, in spite of any disguise he may assume. (I should have liked to question him on this point, but the risk of exciting suspicion was much too great.) In my humble

judgment, however, it would be an exceedingly unwise thing to arrest Lobieski just now. Other opportunities for doing so will doubtless occur; and if he were to be removed now my investigations would be stopped for the time being. I am slowly gaining this man's confidence; and it is through him that I hope to be able to discover the real leaders of the conspiracy. It will be hard if I cannot make some use of my position as temporary head of the society in this country."

This letter the Count posted with his own hands.

CHAPTER X

The Count is tempted

That same afternoon, as Count Borovitchi was turning the corner of a street, he heard his name softly pronounced and wheeling rapidly to the left he saw Dimitrieff, the secretary of the Nihilist Society, with his hat off, smiling obsequiously.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" asked the Count.

"If your Excellency pleases."

"Better come to my rooms, then—you know the address, No. 19, Frederick Street—this evening, about half-past nine."

"I shall be there, Count, without fail," answered the Secretary; and he immediately turned and walked away.

Borovitchi was glad of an opportunity to have a talk with the secretary, for he was one of those from whom he hoped to gain information on those points of the conspiracy that were still concealed from him; and he re-



membered that in a day or two he must either leave London on his supposed journey to Birtova, or so shut himself up that every one would imagine that he had left town.

Punctually at the hour named Dimitrieff presented himself, and was at once shown into the Count's dining-room. Borovitchi received him with more genialty than he had chosen to exhibit to a man of Dimitrieff's appearance in the public street; he brought out some first-rate cognac, and handed him a box of cigars.

The secretary seemed in no hurry to name the object of his visit; and the Count utilised the time spent in some empty talk to balance the advantages and disadvantages of letting Dimitrieff into the secret that he had been the one to draw the black bean.

"Our friend Lobieski has left the country for a time," observed Borovitchi.

"Yes. He is very brave to go to St. Petersburg, is he not?"

"Very. I suppose he will not be long away?"

"On the contrary, I gathered from him that his absence might last for some time."

"You will be the head of our Society, then, for the present," said the Count gravely.

"I! I understood that you were the person selected as president 'pro tem.'"

"True; but I also am obliged to leave for Russia.

You need not repeat, Dimitrieff, but I am going to Birtova."

The secretary uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Poor Goloffski was very anxious that the lot should fall upon him," he observed.

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

"These things are much better decided by lot," said he. "But I want to ask you to whom I ought to apply, in M. Lobieski's absence, for a cheque for my travelling expenses."

The Count's object is saying this—indeed his principal object in mentioning the matter at all to Dimitrieff—was that he might ascertain the names of the persons who acted as custodians of the Society's funds. This point had been guarded with the utmost jealousy. None of the Committee except Lobieski and the trustees themselves had hitherto been entrusted with the knowledge.

At first the secretary hesitated to answer.

Then he said with a gloomy air, "I don't see how any cheques can be signed till M. Lobieski returns. There are three treasurers; and all of them must sign every document relating to the fund."

"But you can't do without money in the meantime!"

"Of course we can't. The rent for the house in Paradise Place has to be paid next week. I mentioned this to M. Lobieski this morning; and he said he would appoint one of the members of the committee to act in



his absence. He left me in order that he might see one of the members and get his consent to act along with the other two treasurers; and an hour afterwards he came back in a great hurry, saying he had tried to see two members whom he thought proper persons for the office, but both of them were out. So he signed a power of attorney which I had meantime been preparing, in blank, and told me to call on the first of these two gentleman, and ask him to be one of our treasurers until he came back; and if that gentleman refused I was to ask the other."

"Well?"

"Well, I called on them both, first one and then the other, and although I explained that it was only to fill up the time until M. Lobieski's return, they both refused to undertake the duty."

Borovitchi had little difficulty in understanding this. Lobieski would only nominate men of some private means for such a post, and men who have anything to lose are apt to shirk the thankless duties of trusteeship.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked.

"I must fill in some one's name," said the secretary, "and I think that you are the proper person to be appointed, if you will undertake the post. It is only for a month."

"I must ask a question or two before I say 'Yes' to

that," said the Count. "In the first place, wha is the amount standing to the credit of the trustees?"

"Only eight hundred pounds in the current account, but we have securities amounting to sixteen thousand pounds. These, of course will not be transferred. They will remain in M. Lobieski's name and those of the other two trustees."

"Of course. And your bankers are?"

The London and Provincial."

"I should also wish to know the names of my co-trustees or co-treasurers."

"Certainly. I am one. The other is Mr. Rufus Marks."

Borovitchi knew Marks slightly. He was a wild hare-brained young Englishman, a man of no particular weight or influence. He considered with himself for a moment, and then said,—

"I have no objection to acting as one of the co-trustees for a short time; but as the office is one of trust and responsibility I do not think that you ought to fill up the power of attorney without consulting Marks and one or two other members of committee—say, one of the gentlemen you called upon to-day. I do not require their assent to the appointment; but I think you ought not to act solely on your own responsibility."

Borovitchi did not say this without a reason. He wished to make it impossible that Lobieski, or anyone



else, should be able to insinuate that he had thrust himself into the office of treasurer. But he was overjoyed at at the fortunate chance which had put such a post within his reach. He thoroughly understood the power of the purse, and he knew that from the moment his name was inserted in Lobieski's power of attorney, it would be in his power to paralyse any important action of the society, at least for a time. And if any untoward event befell Lobieski he might be confirmed in his office permanently.

Dimitrieff said that he would follow the suggestion the Count had made; and Borovitchi hinted that he meant to return the sum allowed for his travelling expenses to the treasury. He merely preferred that things should be done regularly and in order.

The secretary now rose to go, and while drawing on his gloves, he said,—

"By the way, Count, can you furnish me with the address of your cousin, the Countess Beritza?"

Borovitchi was so much surprised at the question that for the moment he could not answer.

"She is in London, is she not?" added the secretary.

"Oh, yes, she is in London," said the other, hastily. "I met her quite lately. I was trying just now to recollect her address, but for the life of me I cannot remember it. I dare say I could tell you how to find it, however. Is there any hurry about it?"

"Not exactly, except that she ought to know soon."



The Count's curiosity was keenly excited, but he was too proud to show it. He said nothing, and as he had expected, Dimitrieff went on,—

"It is about her brother, the Count. It seems that he has not been sent to the mines, or has been brought back again."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; he is in prison at Birtova and he has sent a message to his sister."

The Count started, but managed to cover the involuntary movement so well that the secretary did not notice it.

"It appears that one of the prison warders has privately married a sister of Goloffski's; and it is through this man's wife that our comrade has learned what he knows of the brutal treatment his own wife has been subjected to. I fear"—the speaker lowered his voice—"I fear the treatment Count Alexis Beritza has received has not been much better."

Borovitchi shuddered, and for the moment he felt a pang of remorse. But it was only for a moment. "No doubt the foolish fellow brings it on himself," he said, inwardly. "He always was so impetuous. If he would only keep quiet, he would not be badly used."

Forgetting that he had not yet told the secretary how he could discover Ursula's address, he began to pace up and down the floor. Dimitrieff, who had risen from his chair, sat down.



"Might one ask the nature of the message?" asked the Count.

"That he was very miserable, and hoped that death would soon come to his relief." But Dimitrieff did not see fit to repeat the whole of the prisoner's message.

"Would it not be wiser, kinder, not to deliver such a message?" said Borovitchi.

"Goloffski insists that it shall be delivered."

"But he cannot do that! You know it is against the rules of the Society to divulge information obtained through our organisation to one who is not bound by our oaths."

"Why should not she, the Countess, be bound by our oaths?" asked Dimitrieff.

"You mean, become a Nihilist?"

"Certainly. She would not be the first high-born lady who loved her suffering kindred better than safe, luxurious ease! And she has abundant cause for hating the Russian Government!"

As the secretary spoke these words, Satan entered into the heart of Peter Borovitchi. Already he had felt something of remorse. He had even made up his mind that he would insist that if the discipline at the prison of Birtova were not relaxed, Count Alexis Beritza should be removed elsewhere. But in one instant he had seen that here was a chance of getting Ursula to join the Nihilist society; and, once enrolled, he knew that her ardent temperament would lead her to undertake missions

which would infallibly place her in his power. And at the same time there flashed into his mind a plan for securing her in a net of his own weaving, a plan safe, simple, and easy—base certainly; so base that at first the reply of the Count's will was, "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

But the thought returned to him—stayed with him—mastered him.

"No doubt," he said, "the Countess would be a most valuable recruit for us, particularly if the Government restored to her the family estates. But I can do nothing personally in the matter. Her father is dead, and her brother is in prison. I am her nearest relative; and I could not advise her to take a step of that kind, nor even place the matter before her."

"That I quite understand, Count, but still I think Count Beritza's message ought to be delivered. Your Excellency was about to say how the Countess' address could be ascertained."

Borovitchi paused.

There was yet time to drive out the temptation.

He had merely to refuse to put this man on his cousin's track. If he gave him Miss Bickersteth's address it would be almost certain, he knew very well, that Ursula would be enticed into joining the Nihilists. For some seconds he hesitated. Then he remembered a look of contempt which Ursula had cast at him after his release from prison, and he hardened his heart.



"My cousin's address," he said, "is known to a Miss Bickersteth, who lives at Dollis Hall, on Dollis Hill. Perhaps the best way would be not to apply directly to Miss Bickersteth for the address, but to write to her, and enclose a note for the Countess asking for an appointment. But remember, my name must not be mentioned in this business from first to last."

"Your Excellency's wishes shall be respected," said the Secretary with a profound bow.

"Good night, then. And, by the way, I think you are the one who ought to see my cousin. Goloffski—I don't know—he may insist on delivering the message himself; but if you do take him with you, you must not let him enter into details which would be too painful for a lady to hear."

Again Dimitrieff promised acquiescence, and then he took his leave.

"He may take Goloffski with him now," said Borovitchi to himself, as he closed the street door behind his visitor; "for I never yet knew him to take the straight path if there was a crooked one. And if he does—a dozen words from that poor devil will do more to make her a Nihilist than yards of the secretary's talk."

CHAPTER XI

Taken In The Snare

When Ursula returned home in the afternoon, on the the day following her meeting with Count Borovitchi, she found on the table of her sitting-room a letter which had not come by post. She knew the handwriting on the envelope. It was Lobieski's.

"So he has been to see me!" she said to herself. "What a misfortune that I have missed him!"

But as soon as she had read the first lines of the letter she dropped it on the table with a groan, and clasped her hands to her forehead with a gesture of despair.

"Just when I needed help and advice so much!" she cried aloud. "Who can tell when he will be back? Who can tell whether he will ever return at all? I know he is mixed up with some revolutionary society. What if he should be arrested?"

For a time she forgot her own needs in the anticipation



of evil happening to her friend. Then the sense of her helpless condition returned to her with double force. Ever since she heard of her cousin's friendship with Colonel Brinski, she had felt convinced in her own mind that he was a traitor. But she had had time to reflect that this terribe accusation rested on very little evidence.

It was possible that Frank Bickersteth or his friend had been mistaken. It was possible that the meeting between Borovitchi and the Russian police official was capable of an innocent explanation. She did not dare to act as if Borovitchi had already been proved false; and she knew not what steps to take even if the charge had been proved. Lobieski was her sole reliance. She had meant to tell him everything—her own long-standing suspicions and this startling confirmation of them—and be guided entirely by his advice. And now he was gone, and there was no one to whom she could turn for a word of counsel.

Taking up the letter a second time, she read it through carefully again.

But she found nothing in it to give her any comfort. Lobieski gave her no hint of the probable date of his return. He merely said that he might have to be absent from England for some time. He had wished to see her, he said, that he might tell her how sorry he he had been to hear that she had been suddenly taken ill while she was spending a night at his house, and that he hoped she

had now quite recovered. Neither his housekeeper nor Rachel, he added, seemed to think that the attack had left any bad consequences, but he should have liked to hear her say so herself. The note was very kind, and ended with a polite regret that he could not spare time that day to wait for her return, and bid her good-bye.

Ursula was surprised to hear that Madame Fabrini had gone back to the Manor House—surprised, too, that Rachel seemed not to have told her master about the view which Dr. Stanford had taken of her illness. But this subject had now but little interest for her. Madame Sabrini could not do much harm while Lobieski was away; it would be time enough to consider whether she ought to warn him against the woman when he returned. The trouble now was that she had no one to advise her. To wait an indefinite time before doing anything whatever, after hearing what Frank Bickersteth had said, seemed almost intolerable. But she saw no alternative, and made up her mind to wait for her friend's return as patiently as she could.

Two days later, however, she received a letter which changed the whole current of her thoughts. It was from Dimitrieff, and was forwarded through Miss Bickersteth. The writer said that he had heard through an indirect channel some news of her brother, and he begged for an interview. The very idea of receiving news of Alexis seemed to turn the blood in her veins to wine. She could



hardly command herself sufficiently to write a reply telling Dimitrieff to come to her at once, as soon as possible.

About eight o'clock that evening Dimitrieff and the Russian peasant, Goloffski, were shown into Ursula's room.

The girl rose and looked from the one man to the other with a quick, scrutinising glance. The secretary's appearance did not please her; but she rather liked Goloffski's face. She was not repelled, as an Englishwoman would have been, by his heavy, sullen looks.

"My name is Dimitrieff," said the secretary, stepping forward without the least embarrassment. I believe I have the honour of speaking to the Countess Beritza?"

"Yes," answered Ursula; "but here I prefer to follow the English custom, and call myself Miss Beritza. Won't you sit down?"

The two men seated themselves, one with a free and easy manner that was slightly offensive, the other with a clumsy diffidence.

"You had something to tell me—about—my brother?" said Ursula, in tones that faltered from the very strength of her emotion.

"Yes, Madam," answered the secretary. "We have learned that he is in the prison of Birtova."

"Birtova!—In Podolia! I thought he had been sent to Siberia!"

"So we were told; but the report was incorrect."

"Thank God for that at least!"

Dimitrieff shook his head, and sighed rather ostentatiously. "I fear, madam, there is small cause for thankfulness," said he.

"What do you mean?"

"This worthy man's wife"—he indicated Goloffski with a jerk of his thumb—"is confined in the same prison. One of the soldiers employed as an official married (unknown to his officers, you may be sure), a young girl belonging to Birtova, a sister of my friend Goloffski's. Through this man we have learned a good deal about the discipline of the prison. It is more than severe; it is cruel. Many of the prisoners hang themselves to escape from their misery. And I fear from the message your brother sent—"

"The message! What message? I never heard of one!"

"There is a message," said Dimitrieff slowly, with his eyes on the floor, "which your brother gave to the soldier I spoke of, on the chance that it might find its way to you."

"A message from Alexis! What is it? What did he say?"

"Pardon me, madam, I dare not say more. I belong to a society which has for its aim the liberation and regeneration of Russia—"



"Tell me, please tell me, what my brother said!" cried Ursula.

"I repeat, madam, that I cannot," said Dimitrieff, with an air of profound and deferential regret. "Our society has the noblest aim, but it is condemned by established Governments. We acquire information at the personal risk of our members, we transmit it from place to place, but we cannot tell what we hear except to members of our own body. Why, madam, I have broken one of our rules in telling you that your brother was at Birtova, and in divulging to you the means by which the intelligence reached us. I have put myself and my friend, and to a certain extent the society itself, at your mercy."

"How?"

"Do you not see? I do not doubt your honour for an instant; but suppose I had dealt with a person of no honour as I have dealt with you. That person might have sold to the Russian Government the information that we have, practically, an agent in the prison at Birtova."

"Then why did you tell me? Was it not only from kindness and confidence in my honour? Be a little more kind then, and trust me a little, a very little, farther! Tell me, I beseech you, what my brother said."

"Indeed I cannot, unless——"

"Unless? What do you mean?"

"Unless you become one of us."

"A Nihilist?"

"Yes."

"But I cannot! I do not approve of secret societies and secret oaths. It is against my conscience."

"You do not approve?"

It was Goloffski who spoke. Up to this time he had not uttered one word. Now he had suddenly risen to his feet, his arms stretched out, a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"Ah! But I would join a company of fiends if they promised me help! See madam, my wife is in that cursed prison—you understand?—*my wife*, the mother of my three little children. What was her offence? She had given a copy of a Nihilist publication to a soldier. For that they sentence her to ten years' imprisonment. Think of it, lady! Ten years before she sees me, if she lives till then.

"But she will not live that time; nor will your brother. How do I know? Listen, madam! They are starved, these poor prisoners. They are fed worse than swine. Then they tell them, work. The task must be done, strength or no strength. If you faint, there is the cold bath. If you strike a blow in your defence, there is the lash. My wife struck or pushed a warder one day; and the devils flogged her—"

The poor fellow, half mad with grief, actually went through the motion of flogging with his arm. Ursula



shrank back, horrified, and covered her face with her hands.

"And he was there, he, the Governor, who had ordered the flogging. He stood by, and laughed, they tell me—laughed! My God! I should like to kill him!"

The man's face had an aspect of absolute ferocity, as, holding out his left hand at arm's length, he brought down his right hand upon it, as if in the act of stabbing.

"And he shall die!" cried the Russian, "His death is decreed. He cannot escape. But it will not be by my hand that he will fall—no; fate was not so kind to me. Never mind. He dies. That is one comfort. But another comes—another, perhaps more cruel. Suppose they beat your brother as they beat my wife, will he not return blow for blow? And if he does, they flog him. Cold, and hunger, and chains; and if he complains—the lash. Is there any other hope for revenge, any other hope of putting an end to such infamies than in the society of the Nihilists? No. There is no other hope for us but in terrorising our oppressors. But—you do not approve."

The sarcasm of the last sentence was evidently not intentional; and therefore it struck Ursula with ten-fold force. Her scruples melted away. The inaction in which she had been living fretted her to madnes. By joining the society she would at least be adding her feeble strength to the forces that were leagued against the tyrannous Russian Government. And then, there was

the temptation of hearing the promised message from Alexis.

Is it any wonder that she yielded?

"Stay," she said hastily, "I will become one of you—a Nihilist.

"Freely and voluntarily?" asked the secretary.

"Of my own free will—God forgive me!"

Dimitrieff's lip curled in a quiet sneer.

"This is our crucifix," he said lightly, taking out of his pocket a small metal object, and laying it in Ursula's palm. It was a tiny model of the Broken Fetter. He repeated the words of the oath—the unlawful oath of obedience to an unknown head and to unknown orders, the oath which it is a virtue to break—and Ursula answered—

"I swear it!"

"Now, madam, you are one of our brotherhood, and Goloffski is at liberty to tell you the message he has received for transmission to you."

He made a sign to the moujik, and Goloffski rose, stepped forward, and said, as if he had learned the words by heart,—

"Tell my sister that my end is certain, and I long for it to come, but she must not grieve over me. I have given my life for Poland. Tell her also, if my father dies, and if our cousin, Peter Borovitchi, asks her to marry him, I think she would do well to accept him. Tell her also not to trust too much to the money-lender, Lobieski."



CHAPTER XII

A Brave Resolve

Ursula was astounded—so bewildered that she found nothing to say.

Dimitrieff hastened to add that he was unable to understand the message. He knew M. Lobieski, and knew him to be a man in every way worthy of trust. And he ventured to hope that the Countess would not place too much reliance on that part of the message. But the girl hardly listened to him; and the two men soon left her.

For some hours Ursula remained, crouching over the embers of her fire, deep in thought. She would have been willing to endure anything, or risk anything, rather than remain without her brother's message; and now that she had it, she felt more confused and perplexed than she had been before. It was not so much the part of the message relating to Borovitchi that puzzled her

That only showed that her brother's faith in his cousin had remained unshaken. Doubtless he thought that the Count was her natural protector, and that, orphaned as she was, she would be safer as his wife than if she had to face the world alone.

But why should she distrust Lobieski? He had been a lenient creditor to her father and a good friend to herself. More than once he had proved his kindness. Ursula could only suppose that Borovitchi—if he were the traitor she feared he was—had, in order perhaps to direct suspicion from himself, poisoned Alexis' mind against the Jew.

She tried to think that this was the true explanation of the disquieting message. But she could not quite succeed. She did not positively doubt Lobieski's good faith; but she felt that he was hardly the person to aid her in solving the question of her cousin's guilt or innocence. She was entirely ignorant of the relations in which the two men stood to each other. They might be the bitterest enemies. On the other hand, their interests might be the same; they might be acting in concert. It might do very well, she said to herself, to go to Lobieski with clear and certain proofs of the Count's treachery in her hand, and then ask his advice, or his help; but he was not the person to aid her in prosecuting an investigation about one who might be his rival, or his intimate friend She believed in Lobieski and doubted her cousin; but her brother held the contrary opinion. She felt that



she must seek for aid elsewhere; and where was she to look for it?

At length she made up her mind not to wait for Lobieski's return, but make enquiries for herself. She would engage a detective to watch Colonel Brinski, or the Count, and learn in that way whether they were in the habit of meeting. She could think of no better plan for the present. By-and-bye, perhaps, she might be able to make use of her position as a member of the Nihilist Society to learn something more, and find other means of getting the Count into her power.

Next morning found Ursula on her way to the office of a private enquiry agent. She knew nothing whatever about the man she was going to see; she had simply copied his address from an advertisement in the "Morning Post," and she felt some trepidation in going to a place of that sort at all.

She was somewhat reassured, however, by the aspect of the office. It was very much like that of a lawyer in moderate practice. After waiting a few minutes she was shown into a comfortably furnished room, in which a small, fair-haired, well-dressed man was sitting behind a large writing-table

He rose and bowed as she entered. The clerk who had shown her in placed a chair for her, and retired.

"Are you Mr. Turner?" asked Ursula, in a voice that trembled slightly.

"I am his partner," said the enquiry agent. "My name is Chippenfield. I shall be happy to give you any assistance in my power. What is the nature of your case?—Too young for a divorce, surely," he added to himself—"jealous wife, most likely."

"I want some enquiries made about a Pole, who is staying in London. His name is Count Borovitchi."

Mr. Chippenfield pencilled down the name.

"Spelt with a T? Yes? Thank you. Enquiries of what nature?"

"I wish to know whether he is on really intimate terms with a Colonel Brinski; and I wish, if possible, to get copies of any letters that may pass between them."

Mr. Chippenfield threw himself back in his chair with a short laugh.

"My dear madam," said he, "do you know that you are setting us a very difficult task? The first part of your instructions are easy enough; but—a copy of a private correspondence!—my word, to get that would be no joke!"

"You think it could not be managed?"

"I do not say that. Something might be done. Much would depend on the habits of the parties. It is very much a question of money. May I ask what sum you are prepared to spend on the investigation?"

Urusla hardly knew what to answer. There was a sum of two hundred pounds which Lobieski had managed to



save from the wreck of the family property; and this he had put in a bank in her name. It was all she had in the world, beside what she received for her music lessons.

"I have not much to spend," she said," and I have no idea what the cost of these inquiries is."

"Well the mere cost of watching one or two gentlemen would be about two pounds a day, so long as the shadowing was continued. Of course, the longer it was kept up, the more certain would be the result obtained. But if any attempts were made to overlook a gentleman's letters, that might cost anything, perhaps hundreds of pounds. You see, the detective must first gain access to the house, either as a lodger, or a servant, or in some other capacity; and he might have to wait weeks before any opportunity of glancing at a letter presented itself. Besides, agents who undertake such work, and do it really well—and it is wasting money to employ any others—get very high pay. I would not advise you to begin operations of that kind, unless you were prepared to spend, say a couple of hundred pounds.

Ursula sighed.

"I could not afford so much," she said. "But I should like to find out whether the two gentlemen I mentioned are in the habit of meeting—and, if it were possible, to get some part of their conversation over-heard."

Mr. Chippenfield was puzzled; but he did not choose to

appear curious, so he merely said,—"That might perhaps be managed if they happened to meet in a public place, but it is hardly probable that they would talk of private matters in any place where they could be overheard.—I'll tell you what," he said suddenly, "why shouldn't you try to do the more expensive part of the work yourself?"

"I!"

The girl's face flamed up in a moment; and an indignant glance shot from her eyes.

But Mr. Chippenfield was too much used to such looks to mind them much.

"Upon my word, I don't see why you shouldn't," he went on. "You have a great interest, it appears, in discovering the exact relation in which these two men stand to one another?"

"Oh, I have! Indeed, I have!"

"Well, if you are unknown to either of them personally, you would be quite as likely as any other untrained or half-trained person to do what is wanted. The chief difficulty is to get into the house, and a woman can do that much more easily than a man. She can pass herself off as a nurse, or a domestic servant, or a lady-help. Are you at all clever at disguising yourself?"

Meanwhile Ursula had been thinking; and the burden of her thoughts had been—"Why should I not? Why should I not? If there is no other way of gaining my



end, why should I hesitate? It is for my brother—for Alexis!"

So she did not put the suggestion away from her, as her first impulse had been. She sat silent, while the struggle betwen her maidenly dignity and her love for her brother went on. The inquiry agent had to repeat his question before she heard it.

"Yes," she said, "I have often taken a part at private theatricals at school; and the girls told me I 'made up' very well. Indeed, I once deceived my own teachers, as well as a room full of guests, with a very simple disguise. But I could not do that for this purpose! And if I were to attempt it, I could not keep it up."

"Perhaps not. But both the parties know you by sight, I suppose?"

"Only one of them does. But I could not do such a thing in the case of a stranger. I might in the case of—Count Borovitchi. He is a relative of mine."

"Does he live in a house of his own?"

"I don't know. I hardly think it is likely."

"You know his address?"

"No." Then remembering that she could easily obtain it through Maud Bickersteth, she added—"I can get it at any time."

"You had better let us have it at once," said Mr. Chippenfield, rising to intimate that his visitor had detained him long enough. "And if we find that the

Count is living in apartments, it might be quite possible for you to take rooms in the same house, and without attempting a disguise, you might obtain some information. Of course you would have to be careful to keep out of his way; but opportunities might arise for your searching for letters, or overhearing conversation. Meantime, if you let us have the address, we can easily get precise information on the first point you mentioned.—Good morning."

It was some days before Ursula could make up her mind to begin to play the part of a spy. The idea was revolting to her; but the misery of inaction after what the man Goloffski had told her was yet more unendurable. She felt as if she must do something or go mad, and though the chance of being able to succour Alexis through unmasking Borovitchi was small, it was the only chance within her reach.

At length she made up her mind to give Mr. Chippenfield's suggestion a trial. She might be able, she thought, to learn in a perfectly innocent way something that might give her a hold over the Count, or something that might conclusively demonstrate his guilt or establish his innocence. She had already procured her cousin's address from her friend Maud, and she sent it to Mr. Chippenfield, asking him to make some preliminary enquiries for her, as she had made up her mind to reside at No. 19, Frederick Street, if it were practicable to do so.



The letter was accompanied by a cheque, for Ursula knew enough of the world to understand that services such as she required have to be paid for in advance.

Three days later she received a reply. The enquiry agents said they had ascertained that Count Borovitchi was not at home. He was said to have gone abroad; but it was expected that he would return in a week or two. The house he lived in contained several sets of apartments, which were let to various tenants. None of these were at present to let; but there was a large room at the top of the house which might be had in a few days, if desired.

This promised well; and Ursula lost no time in securing the room. It turned out that Messrs. Turner and Chippenfield's agent had succeeded in making friends with the landlady, whose name was Mrs. Macfarlane, by the simple expedient of discovering that his mother was a Macfarlane, born near Arrochar. He then bespoke the room, as soon as it should be vacant, for a young lady, a Miss Nowell, to whom, he said, his family had been indebted, and who was now in reduced circumstances.

Ursula hardly liked passing under a false name: but the thing had been done, and she reflected that an alias was really a necessity if her scheme was to be carried out at all. She did not give up her old rooms, but arranged to call there for letters and luncheon—which formed her

dinner—every day, merely sleeping and breakfasting at No. 19, Frederick Street.

There was a side entrance to Mrs. Macfarlane's house, out of sight of the front door; and in her character of a poor working-girl Ursula professed herself willing to use this entrance, to avoid giving trouble—an offer which was gratefully accepted. The chance of meeting the Count face to face at the door was thus reduced to a minimum.

Ursula's room was at the very top of the house, very scantily furnished, but of good size and fairly comfortable. It looked towards the front, and thus commanded a view of the street door. Before the Count returned from his trip abroad—he got no further than Paris—Ursula was established in her new quarters. The maid who waited on her told her that "the gentleman in the best dining-room" was coming back; and one April evening Ursula, looking out of her lofty window, saw a hansom with two portmanteaus on the top drive up to the door.

And the girl's heart beat with a new, strange emotion as she saw Count Borovitchi enter the house, and knew that thenceforth the same roof was to shelter them both.



CHAPTER XIII

Samson and Delilah

A day or two after his return Count Borovitchi called at Dollis Hall.

Maud was alone in the drawing-room when he was shown into it; but before long Frank Bickersteth lounged in.

After a few minutes' talk Maud rose, and taking a large ornamental card, plentifully begilt, from her workbasket, presented it to the Count with a mock curtsey.

"What is this? An invitation? To a ball? I am honoured indeed!"

He was greatly flattered, thinking that Maud had conferred a signal favour upon him.

Frank burst out laughing.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, "you are not fully acquainted with the ways of the British Benefactress

when begging for a charity. There is no wild beast more rapacious. That gilt abomination is simply a stalking-horse. You are, as a matter of fact, requested, or rather commanded, to subscribe the sum of two guineas to the Aged Scavengers' Sustentation Fund."

"The Aged Governesses," interrupted Maud, only half pleased with her cousin's chaff. "And you need not be so satirical, Frank. There is no need for the Count to take a ticket unless he chooses."

"You will be there, I hope?" said the Count, with a grave politeness that he could assume very well when he chose.

"Oh, yes, and papa, and Frank, and quite a number of our friends. But pray do not let that influence you."

"I shall be delighted to take a ticket," said the Count, and producing his cheque-book he wrote a cheque for two guineas, which Maud received with a smile of thanks.

After that some chat about the ball followed, and the Count asked and received the promise of a dance. Frank loitered about the room, utterly ignoring the possibility of his being in anybody's way. Borovitchi cursed him for a booby in his heart, but it seemed hopeless to stay on the chance of having a *tête-à-tête* with Maud, so most unwillingly he rose to go.

Somewhat to his surprise Frank followed him down-



stairs, and drew him into a little morning room on the ground floor.

"I say, old fellow," said the young man, blushing painfully, and avoiding his friend's eye, "do you think it possible that the Baroness would accept a ticket for this ball?"

"How can I tell, my dear boy? Why ask me? If I am not much mistaken you should be a better authority on that point than I, or any other man."

"I was afraid I might offend her. Do you think it would be against the etiquette of—of the society she has been accustomed to?"

The Count had some difficulty in smothering a laugh.

"Well, perhaps it would be stretching a point," he said, as if hesitating to give an opinion. "But really, I can't say. Why not try?"

"You don't think she would take it amiss, then, do you?"

"Oh, I don't think there's much fear of that. I've always found the Baroness very good-natured—quite an exception to the rule that a beauty must be ill-tempered. You think her beautiful, I suppose?"

"She is simply the most beautiful, and altogether the most perfect woman I have ever seen; and if I were to live for a thousand years I should not see her equal!" cried Frank.



"Yes; I'm told the lady has a host of admirers, and you seem to be one of them. Eh? Don't deny it. Good-day. See you at the ball, I suppose?" and with that the Count went off.

From Dollis Hall Borovitchi went straight to the small house in the semi-aristocratic street in which the Baroness von Schöffer had taken up her abode.

"The poor young man was all anxiety lest you should be offended by his offering you a ticket for this ball,—a ball attended exclusively by the best, that is the wealthiest, of London middle-class families," said the Count.

He spoke with an air of scarcely veiled amusement and contempt; and the Baroness, biting her lip, turned away her head to conceal the expression of her face.

"I should think you might land your fish that night, if you play him properly," said Borovitchi.

"I am not sure that I shall go," answered the woman tartly.

"Not go!"

"It is not safe. Someone might meet me who—who knew me."

"Pooh! my dear Natalie, it is perfectly safe. These good, respectable, wealthy English folks do not know the very names of the places that have witnessed your triumphs. You will be the most beautiful woman in the room," he added; but the sop did not appear to have much mollifying influence.



"Do you mean that I should marry that brainless young lamp-post?" asked the lady tartly.

The Count opened his eyes.

"Why, what do you suppose I brought him here for, but that you might swallow him? I tell you, you are very lucky to get him so easily. He is a first-rate match. His uncle has no son, and is a banker, enormously wealthy. I shall see you yet, Natalie, in a magnificent set of diamonds, going to be presented at at Buckingham Palace."

The sugared words had no effect; and the Count, nettled at the lady's ill-humour, went on,—"By the way, how do you represent yourself to our young friend? As the widow of a deceased von Schöffer, or as a Baroness in your own right? You told me, but upon my word I forget."

An angry light gleamed for a moment in Natalie's brown eyes.

"Pietro," she said in a low voice, "do you know, there are times when I almost hate you."

"I hope not."

"But there are. You play with me, and mock me, and——" Suddenly the woman's voice ceased. The next moment one great sob shook her from head to foot, and she buried her face in her handkerchief.

The Count's face wore a look of annoyance.

"There, there, Natalie," he said, in a tone that was meant to be kind, "don't be a little fool. You know well

enough that I can't marry you. But you must have some one to pay for all this"—he glanced round the daintily-furnished little room—"and settle with your dressmaker. And what better match could you expect or desire than Frank Bickersteth? I tell you, there are plenty of mothers in England, ay, and women of title, who would give a year's income to hear that he had offered himself to one of their daughters. And yet you grumble as if you thought your lot was a hard one!"

Natalie dried her eyes and faced the Count.

"Why did you put this young man in my way? Why are you so anxious that I should marry him?" she demanded.

"Can you not give me credit for one good action? What other motive could I have than a desire to see two of my friends happy?"

"Happy!"

The Count rose to his feet.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "the young man fell in love with you at first sight—nothing surprising in that, for indeed, Natalie, you are prettier than ever—and asked for an introduction. I brought him here to oblige him—and you, too, as I supposed. And let me tell you this, Natalie: if you don't strike while the iron's hot, if you allow Frank Bickersteth to go home from that ball without being engaged to marry you—you will regret it to the end of your life."



The Count said this slowly and emphatically, and immediately left the room.

The night of the ball came, and Maud stepped into her father's carriage in her white ball-dress, thinking wonderingly to herself, whether that night would decide her fate. She had a presentiment that it would. If Frank did not behave towards her as a lover now, when he was in a manner free to stay by her or leave her, she would be forced to conclude that he no longer cared for her.

Almost as soon as she entered the ball-room she saw him. He came up to her at once, and asked for a dance as a matter of course. She gave him the next one—a set of Lancers. But she saw his eyes wandering from one group of dancers to another, as if looking for some one he expected to see. He was very silent; yet she noticed in him signs of subdued excitement. When the dance was over, he did not ask for her programme, and scratch his initials on it in three or four places as he had been accustomed to do, but after leading her round the ball-room, left her with her chaperon, murmuring something about seeing her later in the evening. Maud felt much hurt, but her pride came to her aid; no one could have guessed from her face what the feelings of her heart were, as she watched her cousin moving hither and thither through the crowd, his fair handsome head conspicuous above the throng.

Half an hour later she met him almost face to face, but

he did not see her. A woman of striking appearance and great beauty was hanging on his arm. She was so beautiful that people turned to look at her, and half a dozen young fellows followed her at a little distance on the chance of obtaining an introduction. Maud's cheeks flushed in spite of herself. A good many things seemed plain to her now.

Another hour passed, and she met them again—the two seemed almost inseparable. This time Frank saw her. He smiled, and paused as if he would stop and introduce his partner to his cousin. But something in Maud's face repelled him, and he moved on. The Baroness appeared to have noticed nothing.

As soon as she decently could, Maud pleaded a headache, and begged her father to take her home. Bitter thoughts were in the girl's mind during the long cold drive. It was too soon for her to be conscious of more than this—that she had given the love of her virgin heart to one who did not want the gift. She felt bitterly humiliated; and in spite of all she could do to master herself, the pain was keener even than the shame.

Frank and the Baroness danced together often—too often, as men and women alike agreed. When they parted Frank hurried to the dressing-room. He was anxious to be gone—to be alone. He had not yet proposed to the Baroness, because he dared not trust himself to pour out what was in his heart in the presence of



others, and the crowd was so great that to find a vacant corner was impossible.

He was hurrying through the inner vestibule on his way out, when a pale face, looking out of a hood, lined with some snowy fur, attracted his attention. The lady was standing some little way apart—alone. He had no need to look a second time. It was the Baroness. In a moment he was by her side.

"You here, Natalie!" he cried, in a subdued whisper. "I thought you had gone by this time. Why are you alone? Where are your friends?"

"This comes of trusting to anyone but one's-self!" she exclaimed, in a mild tone, though her face had a vexed, puzzled expression. "Mrs. Vavasour insisted that I should go home in her brougham; and I suppose she has forgotten all about the arrangement. At any rate, I can't see her anywhere. I think I must ask you to get me a hansom."

Frank was gone like a flash.

In an incredibly short space of time he was back, and leading her down the steps.

When he had put her into the cab, he gave the driver the address, and put his foot on the step.

"No, no," said the Baroness, putting out her hand, as if to hold him back, "it is quite unnecessary, and I am afraid it would hardly be proper."

Frank drew back, fearing lest he should give offence.

The Baroness despised him in her heart.

"Besides," she added. "you have a long way to go, and I am quite near home."

He jumped into the hansom at once, and they set off.

They were alone now, alone in the darkened street, and close together.

"Natalie, he began, in a voice that trembled as his voice had never trembled before—"Natalie, I can keep it back no longer. You must know that I love you. I love you as I think no woman was ever loved before. Natalie, is there any hope for me?"

He bent down and kissed her face. It was wet with tears.



CHAPTER XIV

A Bad Quarter of an Hour

"But who is she?"

This was a question that old Mr. Bickersteth had put to his nephew more than once. Frank had told his uncle of his engagement one evening after dinner; and to his surprise and disappointment the old man had manifested considerable annoyance.

The fact was that the banker was very proud of his nephew, and proud of his own conduct with regard to that young man. He often said to himself that if Frank had been his own son he couldn't have done more for him, which was perfectly true. And he intended that in the fulness of time Frank should marry Maud, enter the establishment in Cornhill, and carry on the firm of Bickersteth Brothers for another half-century. He felt sure that the young fellow was good-hearted and not without brains. He would make Maud an affectionate

husband, and would be as a son to himself. And now he wanted to marry some foreign woman—some idolatrous bigot, or painted Jezebel, no doubt, who would spend his money, and wreck his happiness.

The old man was, indeed, excessively angry; but one can't very well quarrel with a man for not proposing to marry one's daughter, so Mr. Edward Bickersteth was forced to dissemble his wrath. It exploded, however, every now and then, in the form of incredulous looks, sniffs, and disagreeable questions about the Baroness; and of course Frank, to whom the lady and everything connected with her was sacred, did not like this at all.

So when his uncle, with a threatening look on his pink face, asked for the third time—"But who is she? I want to know who this incomparable creature really is? Who vouches for her? Who knows anything about her?" he answered with some dignity—

"She is the widow of—"

"A widow! You, a young fellow barely out of your teens, marry a widow! Oh, good Lord!"

This was very unpleasant; but the young man swallowed his wrath, and remained silent till his uncle had ceased to chuckle. Then he went on,—

"She is the widow of a distinguished banker, who—"

"A banker, eh? This is something tangible. A banker of where?"

"Of Cracow."



"Whew! Cracow is a long way off. Never mind. You come and dine here this day fortnight. Meantime I'll make some enquiries—"

Frank's face was scarlet; his hands had clenched themselves.

"Enquiries—yes. Why not?" asked the old man, with aggravating coolness.

"You speak of making enquiries as if the Baroness, a lady superior to—" he was going to say, "to any woman I ever saw in this house," but stopped himself in time, and went on—"to the great majority of Englishwomen —how superior you cannot imagine till you have seen her—you speak of making enquiries about her as if she were a servant out of place, or a medicant seeking relief!"

"Well, well; perhaps I needn't have used the word. Never mind; come, as I said, this day fortnight, and I'll tell you then more definitely what I think of your Baroness."

The day came, and Frank awaited the interview with some perturbation of spirit. Both he and his uncle were stiff and silent during dinner; and Maud, noticing that something was amiss between them, gave up her efforts to make things more cheerful.

After dinner Frank followed his uncle into the study, took a cigar, but forgot to light it.

"Well, Frank," said the old man, with a well-pleased

look on his face, "I wrote to Cracow, as I said I would; and this is the answer."

He pulled a sheet of thin blue paper out of an envelope, and began to read –

"As to Von Schöffer, there was a bill-discounter—not a regular banker—at Cracow of the name of Schöffer—no 'von' in the case. Gluttonous old sinner. He died last spring. Never heard of his having been married, though, of course, he may have been. Anyhow, the widow did not come forward to assert her claims, for the bill discounter's nephews and nieces shared his property among them. So we may take it that the late lamented Schöffer died a bachelor.' There! What do you think of that?"

"Think! I think, and I know it is an infamous lie, sir!"

"By private intuition, I presume."

"I mean it is a lie, if anyone says that Herr Schöffer was not married, and that the Baroness was not married to him. She is a baroness in her own right, and not through her late husband. And it is usual for widows who are 'born' as they call it, to keep the 'von' after their husbands' death."

"Humph! I doubt it. But that is a point of secondary importance. I have given you an impartial view of your beloved's first husband. If you care to succeed such a person in the affections of the Baroness, as you call her, that is your affair. But I will not have a person of such



doubtful antecedents take the position of a daughter-in-law in my house. To me you have been like a son, Frank."

"I know it, sir; and I assure you I am very far from being ungrateful."

"Prove it, then, by renouncing this woman.'

Frank shook his head.

"I cannot do that, sir. It would not be honourable, for I am engaged to her. And I love her too well to give her up at any one's bidding."

"Very well; then it is my duty to do my best to prevent your ruining yourself for life; and the only way I can put a stop to this insane project of yours is to cut off the supplies. Henceforth your allowance will be reduced to a hundred and fifty pounds a-year, besides the rent of your chambers. I don't think you will dare marry upon that.'

The young man's face grew scarlet. For the first time in his life he realised that if a man without any fortnne of his own will have all the good things of the world, he may be called on to pay for them in a very unpleasant way. What could he say? The very pence in his pocket, the very clothes on his back, he owed to his uncle's generosity. The sense of dependence was so bitter that he there and then resolved that his first care must be to find some way of earning a living. But of this resolve he said nothing, since to his uncle's ears it must savour of ingratitude.

Frank's reflections kept him silent for some time, and

the banker chose to think that his silence was due to sullenness.

"It seems to me," he said, "that if a young man is brought up and treated as a son, he owes something like filial obedience."

"True, sir," said Frank, rousing himself.

"And I am not unreasonable. I do not seek to force your inclinations, and make you marry a girl you do not love. That I have always thought unreasonable. I merely decline to further a marriage I disapprove of."

"Exactly so."

"I think you might give up this fancy, Frank, to please me," said the old mān, with sudden feeling.

"I am sorry, sir, but that is impossible."

"Just so. The only point on which I ever asked you to meet my wishes! It is impossible, of course."

Frank made no answer; and the old man became yet more angry.

"That is the reward a man gets who brings up another's son as his own. Well, I suppose I must put up with it. But mind this, Frank: if you marry this German woman you mustn't bring her here. I don't choose that my daughter—"

"No fear of that, sir," said Frank; and for the first time his voice had a stern ring in it. The old man resented his nephew's tone more than he had resented his silence.



"And for the present," he said, "perhaps it would be as well that intercourse between us should cease."

Frank started and stared at his uncle for a moment, then bowed gravely, and said,--"Of course I shall respect your wishes."

"When you can tell me that you have definitely abandoned this foolish fancy, we will be glad to see you back at Dollis Hall."

"I am afraid, sir, that will be never," said Frank, not without a touch of defiance in his voice.

Then the two men shook hands very coldly, and parted.

It was late at night when this conversation took place; and next morning Frank delayed coming downstairs till he knew his uncle must have left for the City.

Maud was rising from the breakfast table as he appeared.

"Well, this is pretty conduct, sir—But what is the matter? Has anything happened?" she asked, with sisterly kindness.

"Oh, nothing. Only that I am forbidden the house."

"Forbidden the house! Frank, you are joking."

"I assure you I am not. I took the liberty, you see, of falling in love out of my own head, without first of all consulting my uncle. The lady is not fortunate enough to find favour in his sight—not that he has ever seen her; that is not necessary—and I am told to break my



promise to her. I decline. Wherefore I am no longer fit for your company. Oh, you needn't look at me in that way, Maud. It is true enough. I, at least, have done nothing to be ashamed of! If your father—" He stopped suddenly, remembering to whom he was speaking.

"I am sure papa would do what he thought was right," said Maud. Her tone was gentleness itself, but the sentiment was not one to carry conviction.

Frank bounced up from his chair in a fury.

"Of course!" he cried. "Whatever papa does is right. Therefore, I am wrong. No matter how cruel and unjust—there, I am transgressing again. I had better go, or there's no saying how I may shock you. Good bye."

"Frank! You are not going like that? At least take some breakfast!"

"I couldn't; I couldn't eat. You don't understand what this means to me. It is ruin. I can't go on drawing money from a man who tells me that I must not visit at his house."

"Did papa tell you that?" asked the girl, her eyes and lips open with astonishment.

"In so many words," said the young man, grimly.

Maud's elbows were resting on the table. She hid her face in her hands; and soon the tears began to trickle through her fingers.

"Maud, my dear, you must not grieve for me. I am



not worth it. Perhaps—who knows ?—this banishment may be the best thing that could happen to me. I could not forswear myself; I could not abandon the noblest and sweetest woman—Oh, Maud, if you only knew her! Will you come and see her ? "

Without uncovering her face, Maud shook her head.

" My father ! " was all she could utter.

" Yes; I see. That would not do. Well, you will know her some day, when she is my wife. Then you will acknowledge, and all the world will acknowledge, that I have won a queen among women. None can deny that she is beautiful; and she is as good as she is lovely. She told me all about her early struggles, her unhappy home, her unfortunate marriage. She sacrificed herself for her family, and of course she had to pay the penalty. She has suffered much, poor darling: and I had hoped that the end of her sufferings had come. But God only knows what is before us ! "

Maud was now leaning back in her chair, her face pale and motionless, her eyes on the ground.

" You are very silent, Maud," he said after a pause. " And I confess I did expect a little sympathy from you. We have always been like brother and sister. But now, when trouble has come, and the future is dark——"

This was more than she could bear.

" Oh; don't—don't—don't be so cruel ! " she exclaimed.



"I do sympathise with you. If I can do anything to make peace between you and papa, I will do it. What else can I do? How can I congratulate you on your engagement with a lady whom I do not know, and of whom papa does not approve?"

"Maud, your cold, calculating words are worse, than none. Can't you understand that I would value a message to her—even a sympathising word—more than anything else? But women are all alike. There, we will say no more about it. I'm sorry I introduced the subject."

Very little more was said between them; and immediately after he had swallowed a cup of tea Frank left the house. He thought Maud was doing herself an injustice, but he could not forgive her guarded language, her want of sympathy. Long after he had gone out of sight Maud stood at the window, not weeping —she was too proud and too sore for that now—but feeling as if the darkness of night had settled down on her life. Her lover was gone, thinking her cold and hard. She was nothing to him now, she saw very well—less than any male friend who would have spoken the few easily-uttered words of congratulation he wished to hear. But at least she had kept her secret.



CHAPTER XV

The Count's Writing Table

Some weeks went by, and Ursula seemed no nearer the end she had in view. She had ascertained that Colonel Brinski never visited at No. 19, Frederick Street, but that scarcely surprised her. The detectives also reported that, so far as they could ascertain, no meeting had taken place between him and Count Borovitchi. All this was very unsatisfactory. Ursula felt that she was spending her little stock of money to no purpose, so she gave instructions that the shadowing should be discontinued.

One thing only she had gained, and that seemed but a trifle. She had ascertained, partly through her own observations and partly through gossiping with the landlady, that the Count led a tolerably regular life so far as hours were concerned. He rose late, and seldom went out before noon. He returned about six o'clock, dressed, and went out for the evening, invariably dining out. No one



entered his rooms after he left the house for the evening, unless it were the housemaid whose duty it was to make up the fire; and it occurred to Ursula that she might learn something by paying a visit to his dining-room every night.

To be sure, the chance of gaining information in that haphazard way was small; still, there was a possibility that she might find a torn letter, a diary, or some books or pamphlets, which might be evidence of the Count's true character. Hitherto she had shrunk from attempting anything like personal espionage; but time was passing, and as yet she had accomplished nothing; and any day, in spite of her precautions, some unlucky chance might throw her in her cousin's way. So she nerved herself for the hateful task; and one night, a few minutes after Borovitchi had left the house, she descended to the ground floor. She met no one on the stairs, or in the passages. The servants were busy below. She put her hand on the handle of the Count's door; and although she had herself seen him leave the house, it was with a certain tremor of the nerves that she opened the door and entered the room.

There was nothing there to alarm her. It was large and well furnished. A bookcase occupied one corner of the apartment; in another there was an oak writing-table. Ursula guessed that this piece of furniture belonged to the Count, since the chairs and tables were of dark mahogany. A large fire was burning in the grate. It



would want no attention for some time, so that there was very little chance of her being interrupted.

Having carefully closed the door, Ursula went to the bookcase and took down a book, in order that it might serve as a sort of excuse for her presence there if Mrs. Macfarlane should happen to enter the room. She then turned to the writing-table. It was of the usual "pedestal" pattern, with a row of drawers on either side of the desk—locked, of course. The sloping desk, too, was locked. And there was not a scrap of paper on the surface of the table. The Count was evidently a methodical man. Whatever papers he possessed were securely locked away.

On the right-hand side of the chair which faced the writing-table there was a large waste-paper basket, which looked as if it had not been emptied for two or three days. Ursula immediately began to overhaul it; and as she turned over the litter of circulars, used envelopes, and scraps of paper, she reflected that even if she were to light upon a letter of Colonel Brinski's, she would probably be unable to recognise it. It was hardly likely that the Colonel would sign it in full. Important letters would, of course, be put by or destroyed effectually; the most she had hoped to find was some casual note and any such note would be a mere scrawl, perhaps not even initialed. It was clearly necessary that she should become familiar with the Colonel's handwriting. How-

ever, she patiently turned over every bit of paper which the basket contained, without lighting upon anything which seemed the least likely to be of service.

She next searched among the trifles on the mantle-shelf, but there was not so much as a card to be found there. There were two letter-racks, but they were almost empty. Everything was as neat, orderly and barren of any hint about the Count's friends or occupations, as if he had only begun to occupy the room that day. There was no more to be done for the present; so Ursula replaced the book on its shelf, and went up to her own room.

Her next step was to tell Messrs. Turner and Chippenfield that she must have a specimen of Colonel Brinski's handwriting. The detective who was told off for this piece of work was at first minded to comply with the demand by the simple expedient of getting a friend to write one or two notes in the Russian's name; but he reflected that for anything he knew the lady might be well acquainted with the Colonel's handwriting, and he wisely decided that that game was too risky. He tried bribing the hotel servants in vain. He next went to a solicitor, and told a plausible story of the Colonel's having purchased a horse from him, and got the man of law to write and request payment of an imaginary balance of thirty pounds, but the Colonel took no notice of the demand, and that device failed.

Finally, the detective put an advertisement in the



"Morning Post," referring, in terms that could not be misapprehended; to the Colonel and his mission in England, and offering to supply him with some valuable information in strictest confidence. This advertisement the detective underlined, and sent the newspaper to Colonel Brinski's address. The Colonel naturally supposed that a discontented or poverty-stricken Nihilist was going to offer to sell some minor secret, and he thought it might be as well to see the fellow. He wrote, therefore, making an appointment at his club; and the detective had only to hand the note to Ursula, and pocket the ten-pound note which she had promised him in case of success.

Ever since her first visit to Count Borovitchi's sitting-room, Ursula had gone there every evening. It cost her no trouble to glance round the room, and by this time the place had become quite familiar to her. Every evening she scrutinised the contents of the waste-paper basket and the letter-racks, and tried to encourage herself to believe that some day they might repay the attention she gave to them. When the letter in Colonel Brinski's handwriting was placed in her hands, she studied it long and carefully—studied it till she felt confident that she would know the writing at the first glance wherever she should meet with it. She then searched the dining-room every night with double care, for she knew that any day some accident might place Borovitchi's secret within her reach.



One evening, having finished her tea, Ursula sat down at her window as usual, to watch for the Count's departure. It was still daylight in the street, for the spring was now far advanced.

A few minutes before seven she saw the tall form of the Count, dressed in the light overcoat he wore over his evening clothes, emerge from the house. After waiting a short time she stole downstairs. But on this occasion fortune did not favour her. Another of Mrs. Macfarlane's tenants, who occupied rooms on the ground floor, had some friends to dine with him, and there was perpetual coming and going from the kitchen. It was worth while to wait a little, the girl thought to herself, rather than run the risk of being seen in the act of going into the Count's room. She retreated, therefore, to her own room, lit the lamp, and took up a book. But she could not rest; she could not fix her mind on what she was reading. The house was so still upstairs that she could hear occasionally, when the door of the room below was opened, the sound of loud laughter, or of singing from the ground floor. The noise and bustle in that part of the house seemed to mock her. It almost seemed as if a malignant fate were at work preventing her from reaching her cousin's room that night.

Suddenly she started up, resolved that she would not submit to be hindered any longer. Every moment it was growing nearer the hour when Borovitchi, if he had



no engagement for the evening, might be expected back. Ursula had the strong inexplicable feeling which most of us have been conscious of at times (often for no reason at all) that she was allowing a chance to slip by her. She left her room and ran downstairs.

The sound of several men talking loudly at the same moment came to her ears from one of the rooms, but the hall was empty. In another second she stood in her cousin's room.

Nothing seemed to claim her attention. All remained as usual; there was not so much as a pen out of place or a torn envelope on the floor. Ursula was looking over the writing-table, touching it here and there in a half mechanical way, when suddenly her heart gave a leap that made her shake from head to foot.

Count Borovitchi had left the lid of his desk open!

It was the one chance in a thousand which she had hardly dared to hope for. And now it had come to her!

She threw back the lid, and took in the interior at a glance—the writing-pad, the compartments for paper and envelopes, three or four bundles of documents, letters apparently, neatly tied together with red tape, lying side by side.

Not till she had noticed these things did Ursula remember how short the time was at her disposal. The fire was burning low. It would certainly be made up soon; and to be caught by a servant in the act of searching

the Count's desk would mean exposure and expulsion from the house. Besides, there was the chance that the Count himself might return. "Oh!" she thought, with a pang of self-reproach, "if I had only been bold enough to come into the room when I first came downstairs! Now I fear it is too late; and such a chance will never happen to me again."

For one instant, she pressed her hand to her burning forehead; then with eager, nervous fingers she took up the first packet of documents she saw, and without untying the tape she rapidly turned them over, in the hope of meeting with one in Colonel Brinski's handwriting.

Not one of the letters answered her expectation. She laid the packet down, took up another, and was turning over the papers it contained in like manner, when a hand, a man's hand, suddenly came before her face, and grasped the documents she was holding. The girl uttered a faint scream, turned round, and found herself face to face with Count Borovitchi!

For some seconds both stood as they were, both grasping the papers, both too much astonished to speak or move. Then Ursula relinquished her hold of the packet and covered her face with her hands.

The Count seemed to recover his presence of mind at the same instant. Tossing the packet of papers back into the desk, he folded his arms on his breast, and



stood regarding the girl with a mocking smile on his face.

"So, my pretty cousin, this is the way you occupy your leisure moments! Nice conduct for a lady, upon my word! Breaking open my desk, and stealing my papers! Do you know that I have a great mind to send for a policeman, and give you into custody?"

He paused for a moment, and then went on, in a sterner tone,—

"What are you doing in this house? Did you come here to play the spy upon me?"

No answer.

Suddenly his face changed. Ursula did not see it, for her face was still hidden in her hands; but his cheeks were pale as death as, with a swift movement, he put out his hand to the desk. The girl glanced up, and saw him try to open the second drawer of the right-hand tier of small drawers inside the desk. It was locked. He then tried the others. They were all fast. Then he lifted the blotting-pad and made a search of the desk.

"You had better give me the money I left here," he said quietly.

"What money? I saw none."

It was the first time she had spoken, and her voice sounded strange and harsh to her own ears.

"Twenty pounds in notes. Come, hand it over, or I will call in the police."

Ursula saw the trap he was laying for her, and she answered boldly,—

"You speak falsely, as you know very well."

"The police magistrate can decide that," said he. In truth he was only trying to frighten her, not being sure whether she had brought herself within reach of the law or not. "But I have no wish to make a scandal or put you to shame publicly," he continued. "If you answer my questions I will let you go. How did you open my desk?"

"I found it open."

"Oh!"

He closed the desk, took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and tried the lock. It worked with perfect smoothness. He locked the desk, and put the keys back in his pocket.

"Now, tell me," he said, facing the girl, "why did you come here to spy upon me? Why did you wish to search my desk?"

Ursula was silent.

"As sure as you stand there you shall go to prison if you do not make a clean breast of it. Who put it into your head to come here?"

"No one."

"I do not believe you. But what was your motive—your object? You will not speak? Then I shall send for a policeman."



At that moment the door opened. The parlour-maid came in, and stared with surprise at seeing the Count and Ursula together.

"Well, what is it?" cried the Count.

"A lady wishes to see you, sir."

"A lady?"

"She gave the name of Madame Fabrini."

"Madame Fabrini! I don't know any person of that name. Stay, I may as well see her. Show her into the parlour."

The girl retired, and the Count prepared to follow her. But before he went he put his hand upon Ursula's arm and forced her into a chair.

"I shall keep you here," he said, "until I decide what is to be done with you. Meantime you may choose between telling me the whole truth and being sent to prison."

Then he left the room, locking the door behind him.



CHAPTER XVI

In the Dead of Night

Left to herself Ursula sank down on a chair, and tried to overcome her nervousness and face the situation. Even in that moment of difficulty and danger she was conscious that she had gained one slight advantage. She could now prove that Count Borovitchi and the owner of the fatal scent-bottle were acquainted with each other. It was a fact which might some day be used with good effect.

But for the present what was she to do? Should she accept the Count's terms, and confess to him her suspicions of himself and the desperate means she had had resort to, in order to get him into her power? No! A hundred times no! That would mean giving up the contest, and abandoning the only method for obtaining her brother's release that she had been able to think of.

Must she then go to prison? She thought it was



hardly likely that her cousin would persist in bringing a false charge of theft against her. Yet she shrank from the possibility of such a thing, and besides, she did not feel at all sure that she might not be punished for what she had actually done. She clearly saw that the mere beinging of the charge against her would mean ruin for her.

Rising from her seat she went to one of the windows, pulled aside the heavy curtain, and peered out into the darkness. The street seemed to be quite empty. Not so much as a passing cab broke the stillness. The window opened upon the area enclosure, which was of considerable depth. But close to the left-hand side of the casement there was the large flag-stone that served as a landing-place for the flight of steps that led from the street to the front door of the house. And as Ursula looked, the thought sprang up in her mind—Why should I not open the window, and go down by these steps? The lofty iron railings that guarded them would prevent her from using them in the ordinary way; but there was plenty of room for her to clamber down outside the railing and near the street there was a small gate that led to an area door.

The plan seemed feasible enough, and in another second Ursula had thrown up the sash, and was leaning out, listening for passing footsteps. There was no one near, and she immediately stepped upon a chair, and passed

through the window. Then, grasping the bottom of the sash with one hand, she caught the railing with the other and so stepped from the window-sill to the broad flag-stone in front of the street door. To clamber down the steps, holding on to the railing, was easy enough; and in a few seconds Ursula found herself in the street.

She was without hat or jacket; but that did not so much matter. It was dark, and she knew that there was a cabstand a short distance off. The cabman on the rank made no remark as he opened the door of his cab for her—a London cabman is surprised at nothing—and drove off at once to the address she gave him, that of her own lodgings.

Now she felt safe, for she had not told any one at No. 19 Frederick Street her private address, and she felt sure that if it were necessary for her to change her lodgings Maud Bickersteth would refuse to tell Borovitchi where she lived. Besides, she thought that as soon as her cousin had time to reflect he would see that to create a scandal might do him harm, and could do him no good.

But all this gave the poor girl little comfort. She had failed—failed, too, just when she might so easily have succeeded! For she felt certain how that the desk contained secrets of importance. She remembered well the hurried movement of the Count's hand—how it had gone straight to the second drawer of the right-hand tier.



There, she felt certain, lay the papers which he feared she might have seen. If only she could open that inner drawer! Was it impossible that she should do it yet? By this time, she said to herself, the Count had no doubt discovered that she had made her escape. He would probably question Mrs. Macfarlane, and make her promise not to allow "Miss Nowell" to return to the house; but he would do nothing more that night. He would consider himself safe. He would never think that his secret had been guessed; or at least he would never dream of removing, his private papers to any more secure place. Why not go back——?

The girl caught her breath. The very audacity of the idea fascinated her. Swiftly she weighed the chances of detection, the possibilities of success, and before the cab had reached its destination she had made up her mind. She would provide herself with some means of opening the desk and the little drawer inside, and return to Frederick street that very night.

Arrived at her own rooms, she put on a hat and a warm jacket, and drew a pair of old-fashioned india-rubber goloshes, which she used sometimes in wet weather, over her boots. Then she put in her purse all the money that was in her trunk, and went out.

Calling at the nearest shop, she enquired for a locksmith's; and, after some trouble, found one at a small, dirty shop in a back street. At first the man refused to

do anything at that hour, and when Ursula explained that she merely wished to borrow some keys, that she might open a trunk the key of which she had lost, he became suspicious. It was not until Ursula gave him to understand that she was ready to pay him liberally if he would lend her what she wanted and ask no questions, that he became less surly. Finally she succeeded in borrowing two sets of picklocks, and cheerfully paid the sovereign which the fellow demanded as security for their safe return.

By the time she reached Frederick Street it was past ten o'clock. She went at once to the side door, which she was in the habit of using, and knocked gently.

The door was opened by the housemaid, a young woman with whom Ursula was on pretty good terms.

"Gar! Is that you, miss? But you can't come in," Ursula's heart sank.

"Can't come in, Clara? Why not?" she said, boldly, attempting to make her way in.

"No, I can't let you in," said Clara with a grin, interposing her stout person so as to bar the way.

"But why not? Did your mistress tell you not to admit me?"

"No, she said nothing to me. But I know—" The sentence ended in a grin.

"What do you know?"

"I heard the foreign Count tell the missis that he



caught you in the very act of breakin' into 'is desk, and that you stole as much as twenty pounds off him—"

"That is a lie of his invention, Clara."

"Ah, well! Jane says she saw you and him a-talking about it, and you looked mortal white, and no wonder! So he said he locked you in the room till he could fetch a policeman, and you climbed out by the window. So, of course, if the missis knew you were here, she wouldn't let you in—not likely."

"But she has said nothing to you. You are not supposed to know anything of this story."

"No, she's gave me no orders."

"Then, please let me stay just this one night, Clara! See how late it is. I'll be gone to-morrow morning before Mrs. Macfarlane or any one is up. I will indeed."

The girl hesitated, and Ursula took out her purse. She had a sovereign in her fingers, when she luckily remembered that to offer gold would be the surest means of rousing the girl's suspicions, and causing her to shut the door in her face. She took half-a-crown instead, and forced it into the girl's hand.

"It will be a kindness to me, Clara," she said "and—and there are one or two dresses upstairs which I don't want. I can't remove any of my things, and Mrs. Macfarlane may lay claim to them, perhaps. But you may come up with me now and pick out what you choose for yourself."

This settled the matter.

With a careful "Hush!" Clara drew back, and when Ursula had come in, closed and bolted the door. Then she led the way upstairs; and Ursula, as she passed her cousin's door, smiled to think how surprised he would be if he knew who was walking past his door at that moment. Her nervousness had quite left her. She knew she was running a great risk, but she had become more accustomed to the sense of danger; and now it braced her nerves instead of weakening them.

Clara made good use of her opportunities, and when at last she had gone Ursula partially undressed herself and went to bed. She knew she must not begin operations till every one in the house was sound asleep, probably not till two in the morning.

The rest did her good, but she did not feel at all inclined for sleep. Long after all sounds in the house had ceased Ursula gently struck a match and looked at her watch. It was ten minutes before two. She rose and dressed herself in the dark. Then she lit her candle, took out the picklocks, and rubbed a little vaseline over each of them. Grasping them tightly in her left hand, she took the candle in her right, blew it out and groped her way downstaires. When she reached the Count's room she deliberately took the key from the door, transferred it to the inside, and then went in, closed the door and locked it.



A dull glow from the embers showed her where the writing-table stood. She had determined not to light her candle till she had opened the drawer inside the desk. So she placed it on the floor by her side and began her task.

For more than an hour she laboured patiently, inserting one of the skeleton keys after another, and humouring the stubborn lock. More than once she lost hope, but she persevered, and at last with a loud angry snap the lock yielded.

There was now only the lock of the small drawer to open, and that she foresaw would be a much easier job, seeing that the lock must be small and would to a certainty be of a simple pattern. She was right. The fourth picklock she tried shot the tiny bolt, and the the drawer was open.

It was full of papers, as full as it would hold. She could tell that at once by feeling it.

And now, at the supreme moment, a wonderful calmness descended upon her heart and mind. It almost seemed as if she had no personal interest in what she was doing, but as if she were acting as the agent of some invisible power. With steady fingers she lit the candle, and taking out some of the papers, she sat down to examine them.

A cry of horror all but escaped her as the proofs of Borovitchi's villainy appeared before her. For these

were letters from various officers of the Russian secret police, some of them from Colonel Brinski himself. It was plain that for months past Borovitchi had been betraying his companions and it was evident, too, that he had known of his cousin's impending doom, and might have warned him in time if he had chosen to do so.

Ursula's first intention was to take the whole mass of letters and papers; but a moment's thought convinced her that to do that would be not only highly dangerous, but quite unnecessary. If the Count discovered his loss, he would either flee the country, or be ready to commit a hundred crimes to recover them. Whereas, if he were left in ignorance, she would have time to think and make plans for using her knowledge to the best advantage. She therefore selected three letters, one referring to the events that preceded her brother's arrest, the other two (both in Colonel Brinski's handwriting) relating to the acts and schemes of the Nihilist conspirators. These she secured in the bosom of her dress. She then replaced the rest of the letters, closed the drawer and locked it, carefully wiping the outside of it with her handkerchief, to remove any traces of vaseline that might be about the lock. Having locked the desk, she wiped the lock and blew out the candle.

Then she left the room, changing the key from the inside to the outside of the door as she passed through.

But she found when she reached her own room that



she could not rest. She felt as if she dared not linger a moment. It was only a quarter past four, and the prospect of having to walk about for some hours was not pleasant; but anything seemed better than remaining where she was. So she got up, re-arranged the bed, and made her way downstairs. All was darkness, of course, but she was familiar with the passages to be traversed, and reached without any accident the side door by which she had entered the house. A few moments later and she had gone out into the night.

It was eight o'clock before Ursula dared to seek admittance at her old lodgings. Tired out, and shivering from head to foot, she threw herself upon her bed. But she was far too excited to sleep; and ringing her bell, she asked the housemaid to light her fire and bring her a cup of tea. With the tea the girl brought a letter which had come by the morning's post. Ursula did not know the handwriting of the address, but the envelope had a strange foreign look. She tore it open, gave one glance at the enclosure, and then with a scream of amazement, joy, and grief, started from her seat. It was almost more than her over-taxed nerves could bear. The letter was from her brother Alexis!



CHAPTER XVII

Alexis' Letter

There were three half-sheets of common, coarse paper, such as Ursula remembered seeing in the village shop when she was a girl. Tenderly she unfolded them, and pressed them to her lips and then to her bosom. As she spread them out to read them a warm tear-drop fell on the open page. Every inch of space was covered with fine writing. The six pages must have taken hours to write, so small and clear was the caligraphy. With glowing eyes and fast-beating heart Ursula began to read.

"Ursula, best and dearest of sisters! How I long to see thee! I do not say I would give two years of my life, for life is now to me something worse than valueless, —but I think I would consent to suffer two years longer for one poor half-hour of your company. How is it with you, my sister? Are you still living in the Castle? Or have you gone abroad? Are you an exile, like so many



of our countrymen? Are you rich or poor, well or ill, happy or miserable? Do you think sometimes of your unhappy brother? I ask these questions, but I know well I shall never receive an answer. Seldom, very seldom, does a message from the great living world outside penetrate this sepulchre—a letter, never.

"But I must tell you how it is that I am able to communicate with you, and what my life has been since we parted at the drawbridge of the Castle.

"I was sentenced to imprisonment for life; but as my offence was purely political it was understood that I would be sent to Siberia. But whether through some official blunder I was confounded with some other prisoner, or whether I unconsciously made an enemy of some personage in authority, it matters little. I was sent here instead, and my existence has been one long painful martyrdom since I arrived at Birtova. I will not shock you with an account of my sufferings; they are not so great as those of some other unfortunate creatures who are confined here. I have sense enough not to court punishment by resenting the insults I receive. But my heart has bled to see how some wretched prisoners are first baited into being refractory and then punished with the utmost cruelty. Captain Ivanieff, the Governor, is a monster of wickedness. He seems to blind his superiors with ease; no law is known in this prison but his will.

"Some weeks ago Ivanieff was superseded. He

disappeared, no one knew whither. Everybody hoped that his malpractices had been discovered, and that he had fallen under the displeasure of the Government. There was a rumour that he had received a threatening letter from the Nihilists; and that may have had something to do with his sudden removal, though I confess I do not think him the sort of man to be frightened in that way. At any rate he was gone, and we enjoyed some weeks of quiet, I might almost say of comparative happiness. But ten days ago the news spread through the prison that Ivanieff had returned; and I venture to say that no man heard the report without a curse, or at least a groan of despair, escaping his lips.

"Some time ago I sent you a message—whether it ever reached you or not, of course I cannot tell. One of the warders, whose name I must not mention, undertook to deliver it to some friend of his, who, he seemed to think, might be able to have it forwarded to you. I had great hopes that I might be able to open some way of communication with the outside world by means of this man; but it was not long before he was removed to another part of the prison, and then to another town. In his place there has been assigned to me a soldier named Sindorff, through whose kindness I am enabled to write this letter.

"And now for my secret—the great news which makes my hand tremble as I write. Ursula, there is a chance



for me to escape from this place of horror. After some persuasion, Sindorff has promised to aid me so far as to leave the door of my cell unlocked one night. More than that he says he dare not do; but I think I may be able to persuade him to leave an old coat in the corridor to enable me to hide the prison dress to some extent. Once outside my cell, and with a whole night to work in, it will go hard with me if I cannot break out of the prison.

"But of course you will see that when I do get outside the walls my task will be only half done. I shall be re-captured to a certainty unless I have some one at hand to aid me—to provide me with clothes, money, and the means of leaving the country. And I have no one to look to but you, my sister; for I could not expect any of my old friends, unless it were our cousin Borovitchi, to run the frightful risk of helping a prisoner to escape. But Borovitchi will advise you how to engage trustworthy agents, and assist you to do all that is necessary.

"I shall not have time, probably, to make any preparations; and it may be that you may have no opportunity of replying to this letter. So I will tell you now what you must do.

"I shall make no attempt to escape before the end of May, for you will need some time to make the necessary arrangements. Engage a thoroughly trustworthy agent

—Borovitchi will do this for you—and provide him with money enough to buy a pair of good horses. You must also entrust him with a sum of five hundred roubles, which I have promised to give to Sindorff, the warder. Not far from this prison there is a church with a peal of bells. I hear them ring on Sundays; it is the only thing I have to remind me of the free, happy world outside these walls. Tell your agent to find a house as near the church as possible, a house provided with a stable.

"Every night after the thirty-first of May he must saddle the horses an hour after sundown, and keep them saddled till dawn, so that they may be ready at any moment during the night that they are wanted. It may be impossible for him to find a house with the necessary accommodation in the town; if so, he must take a small farmhouse, as near to the town as he can. But in any case—and this is the important point—he must be waiting for me near the church at intervals through the night, every night from the first of June till the end of the month. If I could I would fix a day, but that I cannot do. Sindorff will naturally choose a day when he thinks he may be able to act with the least likelihood of suspicion falling upon him. But you may rely on it I will urge him to let the day chosen be as early in the month as possible.

"As your agent cannot be expected to spend every night in the open air, his best plan will be to secure a bedroom



in one of the houses which overlook the church, and in that case he could watch for me from his window. But entreat him not to rely entirely upon that, but to visit the church, at least occasionally during each night, for you must understand that if he and I fail to meet, I am a lost man. To make sure of our recognising each other, I will say to him when we meet. 'Do you think it will rain to-morrow?' And tell him to reply, 'There has been snow in June before now.'

"If your agent should find it impracticable to carry out my suggestions about horses, he must find a lodging for me within a few miles of the town to which we can go at once. The best way would be to rent a cottage in a lonely neighbourhood. If he cannot do that, he must tell the people of the house that he expects a brother to visit him from Moscow, or some other town. In any case tell the man to bring an overcoat or cloak with him to the church: for every minute I remain out of doors in the hateful prison dress, I offer myself, as it were, to be apprehended.

"And now, dear sister, I have come to an end of my paper, without saying anything of the love that is burning in my heart for you. If you were dear to me during those happy months we spent together at Beritza, you are a thousand times dearer to me now. You are continually in my thoughts; and at night I often dream of you. I dream sometimes that I am riding with you

over the wide, treeless plains, the fresh wind of heaven on my cheek. I see you as plainly, it may be, as ever I saw you in my life; you even seem to speak to me. And I wake to find myself within these walls, kept like a wild beast in a cage.

"But I am no longer a prisoner without hope. Can it be possible, Ursula, that in a few weeks I shall see you? I cannot realise it. I know the enterprise is more than doubtful, but it is well worth risking. I am not sure—I cannot make up my mind—whether it would be safer to make a bolt for the frontier at once, or try to find a hiding place in some quiet neighbourhood in this country, and lie still until the search for me is relaxed. Consult with Borovitchi about this; I will do whatever you and he think best.

"And now, dearest sister, good-bye. God bless you, and give you wisdom and strength to aid me. The issue is in His hands. Pray for me, that I may be set free!—Your brother,—Alexis."

No words could tell the emotions that filled Ursula's heart as she read this letter. One moment surprise and joy almost overpowered her; the next she was trembling with apprehension. As soon as she had finished the letter she read it through a second time, then a third time, to make sure that she thoroughly understood all that her brother meant to convey to her.

As she replaced the letter in its envelope, she examined

the cover to see whether it had been forwarded by some friend at Beritza. But it had not been posted in Russia. The only post-mark was "London—W.C.," and she concluded that it had been enclosed in a letter sent to Goloffski, who, Dimitrieff had told her, had relations living at Birtova.

A sad smile crossed the girl's face as she remembered her brother's repeated allusions to Borovitchi as being the only man who could be relied on to help her in this emergency—Borovitchi, whose treachery had been the indirect cause of all his sufferings! But to whom, then, could she go for assistance? Who would help her to find an agent at once bold, shrewd, patient and trustworthy? Dimitrieff? She recoiled from the idea of placing confidence in him. His face, his bearing, his voice, had inspired her with distrust. Besides, she knew nothing of his capability to find her a suitable agent.

There was another difficulty. She had already spent a large part of her two hundred pounds. Nearly a hundred must be set aside for the reward which Alexis had promised to the gaoler, Sindorff. There was barely enough left for railway fares and the hiring of lodgings, certainly not enough for the purchase of horses.

There was only one who might help, both with advice and money—Eli Lobieski. He might have returned home. As the thought crossed her mind Ursula rose instinctively to her feet. There was not a moment to be

lost, for already the month was far advanced. By the first of June everything must be in readiness. The thought of Alexis actually free, wandering about that church he spoke of throughout the summer night, dreading the dawn which would proclaim him an escaped convict by the clothes he wore, seeking with feverish haste, sick with anxiety, for the succour he expected and finding none—this thought haunted her as the fear of the gallows haunts a murderer. The first thing, she considered, was to ascertain whether Lobieski had come home, or had sent any letter telling where he might be found. Her hopes were fixed on him. "Oh, surely, she thought, he must have come back by this time, or, if not, Rachel may know where he is. If he is in Russia I can go to him there, at once."

Without waiting even to eat or to change her dress, she drank the cold tea which was still upon the table, and set out for Lobieski's house.



CHAPTER XVIII

A Mysterious Telegram

It was nearly eleven before Ursula reached the Manor House. The shrubs and trees that surrounded the old weather-beaten dwelling were now dressed in their robes of green, but they failed to render the place bright and cheerful. The signs of neglect were more apparent than ever. The grass that bordered the avenue was encroaching upon the gravel; the flower-beds had not been attended to; everything told of forget fulness, stagnation, and decay.

It seemed to the girl that all this was a sign that the master of the house had not returned, and she was prepared for the melancholy shake of the head which Rachel gave in answer to her enquiry.

"No ma'am," said the woman, "he's not come back; and no word from him either, as far as I know." She paused and glanced behind her, as if she feared being overheard.



"Can I come in?" asked Ursula. "I should like to speak with you."

"Would you mind coming into the kitchen?" said Rachel, as she closed the outer door behind her visitor. "We shall be more comfortable there."

As they crossed the hall, Ursula happened to look upstairs, and there she saw, looking over the banisters, the dark visage of Madame Fabrini scowling at her.

Arrived in the great stone floored kitchen, Rachel first of all locked the door, and then drew an armchair forward upon a large piece of carpet which covered the floor in front of the fire-place, and made her visitor sit down.

"I see you lock the door," said Ursula, with an amused smile. "Surely you would not presume to keep the housekeeper out if she chose to come in?"

"Would I not?" cried Rachel. "She has no business here, and she knows it. I don't own her for my mistress, not while the master is away. Since he left she had the impudence to dismiss me, as she called it. I told her she might dismiss herself, if she liked, but that I meant to stay and watch over the furniture till my master came back."

"Well?"

"She said she would send for the police, and have me turned out. I told her to do it if she liked; and the police did come, but refused to interfere. So ever since she



won't have anything to do with me; cooks her own meals and makes Sarah wait upon her. I am sure the master will turn her out of the house when he comes back."

"I am sure I hope he may," said Ursula, glad to get back to the one subject that was of importance in her eyes. "But if you can even make a guess as to where M. Lobieski can be, I wish you would tell me. I am going away—to Russia, to help my brother to escape from the prison at Birtova!"

"Is it possible, ma'am? God help you!"

"I trust He will," said Ursula, calmly. "And I must, if posssible, see your master first. If there is any town in France or Germany which he is in the habit of visiting, I would go there on my way to Russia. Have you no idea where he may be? Can you give me no hint that might put me on his track?"

"Indeed, ma'am, I cannot, except that I believe he went home."

"Home? To Russia?"

"Yes. I am very anxious about him."

"Do you think—?"

"I think he may have been arrested. And in that case we may never see him again."

"Oh! don't say that," cried Ursula. "That would be too horrible."

The face of the Polish woman did not soften into an expression of pity. It was hard and stern, but for a

pained look about the eyes, which betrayed her anxiety.

"I am afraid it must be that," she said in a low tone. "He has never been away from home so long before without writing to me. If he were at liberty he would surely let me hear from him."

"But he is so prudent. He would never run into danger," said Ursula.

"True; but he has enemies," returned Rachel, with a quick glance at the door.

"You mean Madame Fabrini?"

"She and some others. Last night she went to London—"

"I know," interrupted Ursula. "I happened to be in the house when the servant mentioned her name."

"Were you indeed? And whose house was it, if I might be so bold as ask the question?"

"I know no reason," said Ursula, "why I should not tell you. It was to the house of Count Borovitchi that Madame Fabrini went last night."

"Ah," said Rachel, sagely nodded her head, "then no doubt it was he who sent her the telegram in the afternoon."

"Indeed! She got a telegram, then? I wish I knew what that message was," said Ursula, remembering how the Count had in her hearing denied that he so much as knew Madame Fabrini's name.

"The message would most likely be asking her to go



and see him," said Rachel, a little mystified. She had no knowledge of Ursula's belief that the Italian woman and the Count had been accomplices in the attack upon her life.

"Do you think it possible," said Ursula, suddenly lifting her head and fixing her beautiful eyes on her companion's face—"do you think it possible that a letter may have come from M. Lobieski, and she has told you nothing about?"

"It is possible, though I think the master would have written to me, at least if he were in any kind of trouble. But if she knows where the master is we can't make her speak."

"No; but do you think it possible that he can have written to you, and that Madame Fabrini has suppressed the letter?"

Rachel sprang to her feet, her eyes glowing, her muscles strained with passion. Raising her clenched hand over her head—"If I thought that," she said, solemnly, "I would kill her."

"Don't get so excited, please, Rachel. I really know no reason why the housekeeper should keep back any letter or message M. Lobieski may have sent to you, nor any reason why she should try to prevent your knowing where he is. It is all pure conjecture on my part. It only struck me as being possible."

"I will soon find out," cried Rachel.





"How?"

"The daughter of our postmistress, who looks after the mails, is a friend of mine. She has a sick child, and I gave it medicine, and helped to nurse it. She will tell me whether any letter has arrived for me lately."

While she had been speaking the woman had thrown on a bonnet and shawl. She and Ursula left the house together.

"You had better wait outside," said Rachel, when they had reached the post-office. "Please go towards the railway-station, and I will come on and overtake you when I have found out what I want to know."

Rachel was gone a long time, much to Ursula's surprise. The girl was able to go on to the station and return almost as far as the post office, before her companion rejoined her.

"Just as you thought!" cried Rachel. "She has stolen my letter! One came for me yesterday morning. It had foreign stamps on it. It must have been from the master. What are we to do?"

"I'm afraid we can't do anything," said Ursula, gravely and sorrowfully, "unless the postman gave the letter to Madame Fabrini."

"No," said Rachel. "I waited to see him; and he declares he put it in the letter-box, and rang as usual. I remember hearing the bell, but that woman was before me. She must have been waiting behind the door, and



no doubt took it out of the letter box even before the postman had time to ring. She showed me a newspaper addressed to herself as if that was all that had come. Cannot we punish her? Can't we force her to give up the letter?"

"You might prosecute her, perhaps; but that can wait till your master comes home. We could not force her to tell what was in your letter; and by this time she has certainly burned it.."

"I did something for you while I was waiting for the postman," said Rachel, after a moment's silence. "Mrs. Newman went upstairs to see after her little one; and I remembered that you had said that you would very much like to see the telegram that came for Madame Fabrini last night. So I just turned over one or two of them, and soon came to it. I took a copy of it. Here it is."

"Oh, Rachel, you shouldn't have done that. It was very kind of you, but too dangerous."

"Danger? Pooh! One must not be too scrupulous when one has to do with a brigand.—Take it."

Ursula took the morsel of paper, and read—

"Let me know the moment you hear news of L. If he returns suddenly, at all costs prevent him and the Countess meeting. This is of great importance. They must not meet for a day or two, cost what it may."

Ursula felt bewildered. Why should Count Borovitch



be so anxious to prevent a meeting between M. Lobieski and herself—for she, of course, must be the "Countess" of the telegram—at that particular time? His reason, whatever it might be, could not relate to the affairs of the writing-desk, for that had happened after the despatch of the telegram. However, there was no time to think about it then.

Ursula went into the post-office and bought a sheet of paper, a pencil, a bit of sealing-wax, and a couple of envelopes. In one of the envelopes she placed the three letters which she had taken from Borovitchi's writing-table. On the sheet of paper she hastily scribbled a note for Lobieski.

"Dear friend," she wrote, "I am going to Russia, to help my brother to escape from prison. If we fail I may be taken. In that case—that is to say, if you do not hear from me before the 15th of July, you may open the enclosed envelope. I, Ursula Beritza, took these three letters from a locked drawer in the writing-table of Count Borovitchi. You will know how to act with regard to them. But in dealing with him, be as merciful as you can. Remember that he is my near relation. Your continued absence has caused me great anxiety, but I am glad to know that you are still alive. Rachel will explain what became of your letter to her. She never received it. Farewell.—Ursula Beritza."

This letter, with the others, Ursula put into the second



envelope, which she sealed, addressed to M. Lobieski, and handed to Rachel, charging her to give it to her master when he returned. Then she bade Rachel farewell and returned to London.

Ursula's next visit was to Dollis Hall. By good luck Maud was at home; and she ran at once into the drawing-room to welcome her friend.

Ursula took her caress almost without knowing it was given, so great was her anxiety.

"Maud, can you help me?" she said, devouring the girl's face with her eyes. "Can you lend me a large sum of money—fifty pounds? My brother, you know, is in a Russian prison. He has written to me; and he says he has a chance of escaping. But money is needed. I have not enough, by at least fifty pounds. Is it possible, do you think—?"

She stopped, quite unable to go on.

"I am sure papa will give you a cheque if I ask him," said Maud, passing her arm round the other's waist, and forcing her to sit down.

"But he is not here. He will not be home till five o'clock?"

"No."

"And every moment is precious to me. I had hoped to be able to leave London to-night—"

"You, Ursula! Are you going yourself to Russia?"

"Yes, I must."

"Why, you are a heroine! I almost envy you—but wait."

She ran out of the room, and came back in a few minutes, carrying a little drawer in her hands. In it there lay a cheque for five and twenty pounds, a five pound note, and three sovereigns, and a small antique watch set with brilliants and pearls.

"Mr. Lewis, the jeweller, in Bond Street, offered me fifty pounds for this watch once," said Maud. "He will be willing, I am sure, to lend you twenty on the security of it; or at least tell you how to get the money. I will write him a note that you can take with you. But how weak and ill you look, my poor darling!"

"Oh, no! But how good you are, Maud! Oh, how good!" And she seized the large, white, shapely hands, and kissed them passionately.

Maud's eyes glistened.

"Don't, dear. It isn't worth it. You see, I thought papa might ask questions, and make objections; but he can't refuse to give me some more money. He can't help himself. Now, you must, and shall, eat some lunch while I write the note to Mr. Lewis."

On reaching her lodgings with the money safe in her pocket, Ursula told her landlady that she was obliged to leave for the Continent at a moment's notice, and that in consequence she would give up her rooms. Her reason for this was that she wished to make it impossible for



Borovitchi to trace her on her return to London. Her belongings she packed in a trunk which she deposited at the left luggage office at the railway station as she left London by the evening mail.

Determined not to spend a penny which she could save, Ursula travelled by third-class. As she was sitting on the deck of the steamer she noticed a tall, ill-dressed man, something like a mechanic out of work, leaning over the bulwarks. Something in his shape and carriage made her think that she had seen him before, and that not long since. She rose, and went nearer to him. Then she knew him. It was the man who had come to her lodgings with the secretary on the night when she joined the society of the Nihilists. A moment later she remembered his name—Goloffski.

Stepping up close to him Ursula laid her hand on his arm, and spoke to him.

He started, looked round, and stared at her. When he saw who it was he stared yet harder.

"You have not forgotten me, I see," said Ursula, in her low sweet voice; "nor have I forgotten you. I am glad to meet you, for I am quite alone, and I can trust myself with one of our own people. But first let me thank you for forwarding me that letter. It was from him —from my brother."

"What letter? I know of no letter."

"But it was certainly from my brother, Count Beritza."

Then she remembered that the warder in charge of her brother had been changed; and that the new warder might have found some other way of communicating with her. It did not occur to her to ask how he had discovered her address in London.

"Where are you going?" she asked her companion.

"I? To Russia."

"Is it not dangerous for you?' asked Ursula, dropping her voice to a whisper, "too dangerous?"

"I do not care. I must go."

"I, too, am going to Russia," said Ursula, after a pause. "Shall we go together?"

"Together, Countess? You and I?"

"Yes. I need your help."

The rough peasant bent down, and in the friendly darkness reverently kissed her dress.

Then he said simply—"I am ready."



CHAPTER XIX

The Count's Offer

When Borovitchi returned to his dining-room after getting rid of Madame Fabrini, and found that the window was wide open and his prisoner gone, he stood petrified with astonishment. It had never occurred to him that his cousin, a girl in no way remarkable for her athletic powers, might require to be watched as if she had been a man. After the first surprise was over, he rushed to his desk, and tried to lift the lid. It was just as he had left it. Not content with a cursory examination, however, he unlocked it, opened the drawers inside, and looked over their contents. Satisfied that all was safe, he re-locked them, and locked up the desk, closed the window, and threw himself into a chair to consider the position.

Having come to the conclusion that he had had a narrow escape, and must not run the same risk a second time, he summoned Mrs. Macfarlane, and in

the hearing of Clara, who was listening at the keyhole during the interview, accused "Miss Nowell" of trying to rob his desk, and warned her against admitting that young woman under her roof for the future. The good Scotchwoman was amazed and shocked, and readily promised compliance with the Count's wishes; only, not imagining for a moment that "Miss Nowell" would dare to present herself at the house that very night, she put off speaking to the servants till next day.

Two or three days after this affair happened Count Borovitchi went out to Dollis Hall. He knew from Frank's own lips that his plan for removing that young man from his path had perfectly succeeded. He felt tolerably sure that there was no other rival for him to fear; he was well aware that in such cases delays are dangerous; and yet he shrank from coming to the point with Maud. He was determined that when he did speak he should not meet with a refusal; and he felt by no means certain that if he were to propose to her now he would be accepted. And yet to spend more time in preliminaries seemed worse than useless.

After a good deal of consideration the Count came to the conclusion that he would defer making the final assault until he had secured Mr. Bickersteth senior, as an ally. Thenceforth he determined to make it his first aim to please, not the daughter, but the father. This visit was accordingly timed so that it might easily be pro-



longed until Mr. Bickersteth came home from the city, and when the banker did make his appearance it became the Count's endeavour to lead him into a discussion on his favourite topics—the appreciation of gold, bi-metalism and the Indian currency. After a little time he succeeded, and the financier once mounted on his hobby rode him whip and spur, until Maud gently interfered with an intimation that it was time to dress for dinner. The Count then started up, as if for the first time conscious of the lateness of the hour, and offered profuse apologies, which were cut short by the banker asking him to stay to dinner.

This was the goal towards which everything had been planned by the Count. He thoroughly understood how superior is the position of a friend invited to dine "*en famille*" to that of a mere acquaintance, who may not hope for more than a cup of tepid tea and a finger biscuit during a stiff afternoon call. Of course the Count glanced at his morning dress with a becoming degree of hesitation, and of course Maud seconded her father's invitation.

Mr. Bickersteth was a strong mono-metallist. Borovitchi knew just enough of the subject to be able to avoid making gross blunders, but he argued with modesty, yet considerable force, on the bi-metalist side. The discussion was renewed at dinner, the Count managing to make Maud understand that the subject bored him, and

that he would much prefer talking to her, but talked "shop" out of deference to her father, thus doubly earning her good opinion. To Mr. Bickersteth he appeared first as a fair and liberal minded opponent, then as one more than half convinced by the banker's arguments, then as one who was in doubt and anxious to obtain a sense of settled conviction on that important question, and finally as an interesting but not very robust convert. Of course these stages were not gone through at one sitting. The Count was invited more than once to dine and sleep at Dollis Hall; and in this way he found many opportunities for talking to Maud.

At length he judged that the time had come for making the *grand coup*; and one evening after dinner he formally asked the banker's leave to speak to his daughter.

Mr. Bickersteth heaved a sigh, which was not in itself a complimentary thing to do.

"Yes, Count," said he, fixing his eyes on the fire with a melancholy stare. "I have anticipated for some time that you would be making a proposal to me of this nature; and I don't know that I have any decided objection to the match, if you can satisfy me on one point."

"And what is that, sir?" asked the Count, with an anxiety he could not conceal.

"I am an old man, and very far from strong. Maud is my only child; and I cannot bear the idea of parting with her altogether. If you were to take her to Poland—"



"Set your mind at rest on that point sir," cried the Count, immensely relieved. "I have no wish to see my distracted country again; and I am ready to pledge myself to reside permanently in England."

"In that case I give my consent to your proposing to my daughter, I may tell you that I had other intentions with regard to her, but these have been frustrated.—Have you ever turned your attention to finance?" he added, after a few seconds.

"Not in any regular way; but the subject is one of great interest to me, as you know."

"I have sometimes wished," went on the banker, "that my son-in-law should take my name and succeed me in the firm. Would you have any objection to that?"

"None in the world, sir; only that perhaps your daughter would prefer that I should not drop the title."

"True," said Mr. Bickersteth, with a smile; "but we are cutting a little before the point. I see you are anxious to be off to the drawing-room and put your fate to the test. Well, I won't detain you."

The Count bowed and left the room. But he did not feel at all certain about the result of the coming interview. Frank and unassuming as Maud was, there was a quiet dignity about the girl that made Borovitchi a little afraid of her. He knew well that the love he had to offer her was not such as she would accept, if she understood its real nature; but he believed he could counterfeit the genuine

article so well that a simple girl like Maud would not discover the difference. And he was justified in his belief. Borovitchi's voice and manner were perfection. He could simulate the very tones proper to an impassioned yet respectful lover, and, more than that, he knew that there is no surer road to the favour of a generous girl than to throw yourself upon her pity.

Almost before the Count began to speak Maud knew what he meant to say, and the feeling in her mind was that she would refuse him. He had never caused her pulse to beat quicker by the millionth part of a second; and Maud had never dreamt that she would marry any man without being in love with him. But as the Count's low, tremulous tones fell on her ear she felt herself compelled to listen to him. She could not stop him, as she had at first intended doing. He spoke of his ancient race and its fallen fortunes, of his country and her wrongs, of himself, "an exile, and though living in a crowd, always lonely in my heart," of his craving for love, and sympathy, and home.

Maud listened, and her heart was touched. She wished that she could have made the world bright and glad for this homeless fellow-creature, as he said she could do. But when Borovitchi went on to say that he spoke with her father's express consent, adding proudly,—"Considering the difference between his fortune and mine I should have thought it dishonourable to do otherwise," she gave



a slight start, realising for the first time that she was dealing with an affair of serious moment. The Count went on pleading, though Maud more than once begged him to stop.

"But, Count, I do not love you," she said, blushing, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Pardon me, I hope you do like me a little. The two things are not identical; but I should be a fool to expect you to feel for me all that I feel for you. From the little seed of liking the flower of love will grow, if you do not crush it while it is young and tender. If you will accept me, Maud, it will be my delight to make you love me. If I could only make you understand how happy your saying 'Yes' would make me! You would turn the sorrow of my life into gladness. I care for nothing in this world but your love, and that I am sure of if you will let me be your lover."

He did not dare to say "husband." No need for bringing things too near all at once. He watched the effect of his words, and saw that the girl was hesitating. All that he could gain from her, however, was a promise not to close her heart against him until she had seen her father. With this he was obliged to be content, and as soon as the promise had been given, the Count wisely left the room.

On his way out, he saw Mr. Bickersteth for a few moments.

"Well?" asked the old man, a trace of anxiety in his tone.

"I cannot ask your blessing yet, sir," said the Count, with almost filial tenderness of manner, "but I hope the time will not be long before I may do so. Maud wishes to take time to consider her reply. It is very natural. But I may say I have every ground for hope."

"Yes. When young ladies ask for time, it generally means a surrender. By-the-bye, I presume you will be able to satisfy me as to your financial position? I do not stand out for a wealthy son-in-law, still—"

"I quite understand you, sir; and I shall ask for an early opportunity of satisfying you on that point. The family estates have been greatly reduced, but my income is sufficient. I will lay the details before you at any time you desire it."

"Oh, yes, thanks," said the banker, a little embarrassed. "Perhaps we are rather premature in speaking of these things. But I thought I'd mention it. Good night."

A few minutes later Maud entered the study, and kneeling at the side of her father's chair without speaking, threw her arms round his neck, and laid her fair head on his shoulder.

"So my little bird wants to fly away from me, does she?" said the old man, half playfully.

"Oh no, papa, no!" whispered the girl, clinging to him more tightly. "I shall never want to leave you."



"I like to hear you say so, my dear. But one must be sensible about these things. I am getting to be an old man, my dear; and I am not so strong as I look."

This was a favourite delusion of Mr. Bickersteth's.

"In any case, my mind would be more at rest if I saw you happily married. Now this Count Borovitchi—I would have preferred an Englishman, but that can't be helped—is well born, and any one can see that he is a gentleman. If he pleases you, my child, I hardly think you could do better. He has promised to live in this country. He is not rich, but I don't mind that. I shall feel, all the more, that you are my own daughter still, if I contribute to the expenses. So, try to think over the matter prudently, my darling; and remember that a large share of happiness may be had in the married state, even if there is no preliminary process of falling in love—that is, on the girl's side. As for the Count, I have no doubt he is very much in love with you. Now, good night, my child, and God bless you."

Meanwhile the Count was thinking over his prospective father-in-law's last words to him. They gave him a good deal of trouble. How was he to produce evidence of means that would pass muster before the practised eyes of a banker? His income from the remnant of his estate which had survived the three years he had spent in Paris was only about forty pounds per annum. He had three hundred a year from the Russian Government, but he

could hardly dwell upon that as a source of income, especially as he held nothing in the nature of a post to account for it. Yet Mr. Bickersteth was evidently not disposed to take his word for it that he was a man of means. What was he to do? How was he to produce an appearance when the substance was lacking? But after some cogitation, the Count recovered his serenity. He thought he saw a way out of the difficulty.



CHAPTER XX

Maud's Decision

Borovitchi was seated with one or two of his fellow-members in the council chamber of the Nihilist Society. It was the day for the monthly meeting of the Committee; and the Count had a purpose in coming to the house in Soho half an hour before the time. He wished to prevent the other members of the Committee from meeting together and discussing the matter of the proposed assassination of Ivanieff in his absence. He had heard that the Governor of the prison had returned to Birtova, and the news had alarmed him considerably. He foresaw that it would be impossible to hide from his fellow-conspirators the facts that he had himself drawn the fatal lot, and that the doomed man not only lived, but continued to practise the cruelties for which he had been condemned.

Before the hour fixed for the meeting had struck, the

room was nearly full of men, most of them of the "superior artisan" order, and all of them foreigners. It was evident, from their glances and mutterings to one another, that there was some topic on hand upon which they felt keenly, and that there was a strong under-current of dissatisfaction among them. Of this, however, the Count took no notice. He opened the meeting by regretting Lobieski's continued absence, and went on to call on various members for the customary reports.

The meeting was about half over, when this routine was interrupted by a tall young man, who rose at the lower end of the table, and begged leave to speak. The youth's beardless face was flushed with excitement; his long hair hung in disorder over his pale forehead. It soon became evident that his theme was the escape of Count Ivanieff, and it was also manifest that he had the sympathy of his fellow members. His grievance did not take long to put into words. He said that the member deputed to carry out the sentence of the Central Committee had failed to do his duty, and that an enquiry was necessary. His speech was followed by a loud murmur of applause; there were even to be heard low cries of "Traitor!"

"Is our friend Goloffski here?" enquired the President glancing down the table, though he knew, of course, that the man he pretended to seek was not in the room.

"He is generally interested in such questions, and I thought he might like to say a few words if he happened to be present."

"Goloffski is not in London, I believe," said the secretary. "No one appears to have seen him for the last fortnight or more."

But some members of the Committee detected the irony in Borovitchi's words, and a dangerous light flashed in their eyes.

The Count rose to his feet. His voice was low, as befitted a serious subject, but full and unhesitating; his manner grave, but free from all trace of embarrassment. Yet the thought in his mind as he glanced down at the circle of pale, stern faces was—"Good heavens! If these men suspected me, what would be my fate? I should never leave this place alive!"

In a steady voice, that arrested the attention by its very calmness, Borovitchi went on to say that the member who had drawn the fatal black bean had reported to him, as representing M. Lobieski. He had reported that he had gone to Birtova to accomplish his errand, and found that Ivanieff had vanished. No one could tell where he was, and the closest inquires produced no result. The member then returned to England. There had been a rumour that since that time the Governor of the prison at Birtova had returned to his old post, but that rumour had not been confirmed. (Here a murmur of dissent ran

round the room.) At all events, continued the Count, his duty was plain. He would ask the secretary to forward the substance of this report to the Central Committee, and ask for fresh instructions.

Something like a clamour arose upon this. Some demanded the name of the man who had drawn the black bean; but the majority, who knew that the Count was speaking of himself, forbore to press the point. They demanded, however, that the "executioner," as they called him, should go back to Birtova without delay.

Borovitchi sat unmoved, allowing the clamour to expend itself. Then he declared that he should not advise the member he had referred to that he was bound to go back to Birtova without fresh instructions. On the contrary, he himself thought he ought to wait for further orders. It might be well, however, for the secretary to mention to the secretary of the Central Committee that there was a report that Ivanieff had been seen again at Birtova, and ask whether it was true. It was unreasonable to expect a man to take a journey of twelve hundred miles on the strength of a mere rumour.

There was force in this suggestion, as was evident from the silence that followed it. Borovitchi then quickly assumed that the matter had been disposed of, and passed on to other business. But he knew now that he had temporarily escaped a great danger: and he drew a long breath of relief when, the meeting having come to an end,

the last of the committee-men walked out of the room, and he and Dimitrieff were left alone.

Then the Count, knowing that Dimitrieff must be aware that he had drawn the black bean, pretended to take him into his confidence. Having done so he added, in that tone of *abandon* which is so flattering when used by a man of superior rank to an inferior—"If our good friends imagine that I am going to trot backwards and forwards across Europe like a Government courier—what they call a Queen's messenger here—for every rumour that springs up, they are much mistaken. No, no! I have no objection to shoot my man at twelve paces or at no paces at all, if my duty requires it; but I must have reasonable grounds to go upon and precise orders."

The secretary smiled and murmured an assent, but Borovitchi saw that the man's face belied his words, and hastened to change the subject.

"We have about seventeen thousand pounds in cash and securities lying at the National Provincial Bank, haven't we?" he remarked.

"Yes," said Dimitrieff, somewhat surprised.

"Standing in your name and mine."

"And Mr. Marks'."

"And Rufus Marks'. True. But he is a nonentity.—Do you know, Dimitrieff, it has sometimes occurred to me that we are very foolish to have such a large sum of money in our power, and make no good use of it. Ha,

ha! man, don't look so scared. I don't mean to propose to steal the funds of the Society. But don't you see? Money has two values, so to speak—its own, and the credit it brings with it. Our Society does not want that second advantage of wealth. We do not mean to publish a balance sheet, eh? Well, I don't see why you or I should not have the advantage which the credit of possessing so respectable a sum of money would bring to us. You see?"

"Hardly, your Excellency."

"Oh, drop 'your Excellency,' my dear fellow. We are in England, you know.—Well, I only meant that sometimes it might be very convenient, perhaps essential, to the success of one's plans, that one should be thought tolerably well off. Why not refer to the fund as if we had a personal interest in it? Sometimes a banker's reference is required. Why not be able to refer to the highly-respectable London and Provincial, or whatever bank may have the custody of our funds for the time being?"

"I don't know that there are any very grave objections," said the secretary, after a pause. "But M. Lobieski——"

"M. Lobieski won't know anything about it," returned the Count lightly. "It is only for the sake of re-assuring an acquaintance that I wish to pose as the beneficial owner of this money—a mere matter of form. I should be happy to forward you a cheque as an acknowledgement



of your good nature in this matter, only my bank account is at a low ebb at present. However, I will give you a bill for fifty pounds at six months. How will that do?"

"Your Excellency is too generous."

"Not at all. Only you must promise not to discount it. It would never do if people were to hear that I had bills floating about. Suppose we make it a post-dated I O U?"

The Secretary looked as if he would have very much preferred the other form of security, but he said the I O U would do.

"That's right, my good friend, and I will do as much for you some day if you require it. Now you will just write me a little note referring to the money——"

"Oh, I couldn't write a letter," said Dimitrieff, recoiling. "Conversations one doesn't mind. One can always forget or deny them. But writing? No, thank you! Why, it would be as much as my life is worth if it should come to the ears of the Central Committee!"

A suspicion crossed his mind that the Count, (acting perhaps under instructions from the central committee), was laying a trap for him, in order to test his integrity. Borovitchi saw the suspicion reflected in the man's face, and considered for a moment whether he could not pass off Dimitrieff as a gentleman, and introduce him to Mr. Bickersteth as his trustee from Poland, on a visit to England. But no; he saw that that would not do. Dimitrieff could not be made to look the part.



"I'll tell you what we might do," said the secretary, "if you will give me ten pounds down, and a bill for the balance."

"Well?"

The Count's urbanity had vanished.

"I will get the letter you wish me to sign copied in a handwriting similar to mine, but not the same. You can produce it from an envelope that has passed through the Russian post office, and show it to your friend. Then, if anything should happen, I can prove that the letter is a forgery."

"Well done, Mr. Secretary!" cried the Count, in a tone of admiration that was half mocking, half sincere. "You are making yourself safe, at any rate."

"That is what I mean to do. And I must have the letter back within seven days," retorted the other.

To these terms Borovitchi was compelled to agree. He drafted a letter addressed to himself by Dimitrieff. who represented himself in the letter as a trustee under the will of the Count's late father, alluding to the sum of £16,850, "being one fourth of the proceeds" of the sale of some land lately sold under the will, which he said he had remitted to England in the names of the writer, the Count, and "my co-trustee, Marks, who is now in Egypt." This letter was copied by an acquaintance of Dimitrieff, in handwriting resembling the secretary's, so that if it were shown to any of the officials of the Bank the

differences would not be readily detected.

The letter was a masterpiece in its way, and quite deceived Mr. Bickersteth. He made inquiries at the National Provincial Bank, and as the manager knew nothing, of course, as to the true owners of the money the inquiries were satisfactorily answered.

Just four days after he had made his proposal to Maud the Count went out to Dollis Hall to receive her answer. He had little doubt what that answer would be; so little doubt that his manner, when he found himself alone with the girl, was almost that of an accepted lover.

"Count," said the girl, in a nervous, hurried way, "I am very sorry I did not answer you finally the other evening. I find I cannot love you, and therefore I beg to decline the offer you made to me."

Borovitchi was fairly amazed.

"But, Maud—" He stopped, recollecting that for him to say that he had taken her consent for granted would be the worst thing for his purpose that he could say.

He let his head fall on his breast, and buried his face in his hands.

"I might have been prepared for this," he said, as if struggling with his emotion. "But I had allowed myself to hope. And now the blow has come with cruel force. Pardon me, mademoiselle; excuse my feeling showing itself in this way. I am ashamed, yet I cannot help it. Oh, what a difference to me!"

He was silent, and Maud said nothing. She was too much pained to speak, and words could do no good.

"My heart is broken, and my future is all dark!" he exclaimed. "Where shall I go to hide myself and my misery? Where can I go? Nowhere. Your face will always be there, haunting me, reminding me of the happiness that might have been mine. And I had thought that you liked me! Ah, please, mademoiselle, have pity, and at least say that you do not utterly despise me!"

"Despise you? No!"

"But you must. I must look so foolish in your sight —so weak. If anyone else should see me thus unmanned!"

Maud was distressed. She had not thought it possible that the Count should feel so acutely. She had thought him rather cold, a little conventional, and hard. How mistaken, she said to herself, she had been!

She tried to comfort him. But the only comfort she could give him, the Count declared, was to assure him that she did not utterly despise him, that he still had her regard, her esteem, and a small, a very small corner in her heart.

Yes; she would allow as much as that.

"Then I am not without hope!" cried the Count, joyfully. "If the way is not barred, such love as mine must win in the end!"

"Oh no! I don't think that—"

"Maud, darling—let me call you so for once—I know you do not love me; but can you not bear with me as your lover? If your heart is free, why not allow me to love you? It will make me, oh! so happy, just to be allowed to worship you!"

The girl was touched, but she found no words to say.

"Let me go on loving you," said the Count, "and dreaming that perhaps a day may come when you will make your father happy, and me the most blessed among men. Even a dream of hope is so much better than despair, is it not?"

"Yes," said Maud, absently. She was saying to herself "After all, why should I not?" Her hope in life was gone. She cared very little—nothing, indeed—whether she married or remained single. If this marriage would please her father, as she had no doubt it would, and render a lonely fellow-creature who loved her really happy, could she make a better use of her life? It could hardly be called a sacrifice, for although she did not love the Count, she liked him well enough, and she believed in him. The Count saw that she was thinking, and remained silent.

"If you are sure it would make you happy," said Maud, suddenly, fixing her clear grey eyes on him, without blush or tremor, "I will do as you wish. Pardon me—one moment," as the Count uttered a fond exclamation, "I tell you frankly that I do not love you. Perhaps I may, in time. But at present my life is a very useless

one. If I can please my father, and be of use to you, I am willing to try to make you a good wife."

Borovitchi seized her hand and kissed it rapturously; but when he tried to approach her face, she drew back.

"Not yet," she said, gently, and the Count took care not to insist.

After declaring that she had turned his purgatory into paradise, and had rendered him the happiest man on earth, he left the house.

Maud stood at the window and watched him as he walked down the avenue; and as she looked the tears filled her eyes so that she could see no longer. Hastily she turned away from the window, brushing away the tears, and as she turned her eyes fell on a small photograph of her cousin, standing on the mantel-piece in a sandal-wood frame. It was a bright, expressive portrait —Maud remembered well the day he had given it to her.

With a steady hand she took it from the frame, and stood gazing upon it for several minutes, a whole world of love and sorrow in her shining eyes. Then she kissed it tenderly, pressing it closer and yet closer to her lips. And then with a sudden movement she turned away her head, covered her eyes with her left hand, and with her right dropped the portrait into the heart of the fire. Nor did she uncover her eyes till the ceasing of the faint crackling sound told her that the photograph had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXI

A Friend in Need

On the twenty-first of May Dr. Stanford went out before breakfast on purpose to meet the postman. It was the day on which he expected to get a note from Ursula Bertiza (according to her promise), to assure him of her safety and well-being. On the twenty-first of April he had received a few lines from her, merely to say that she was well and that no danger threatened her, and the young surgeon had been counting the days till he should hear from her a second time. So far from forgetting the girl whose life he had saved, his spare moments were generally spent in thinking of her and in forming wild schemes for meeting her once more. He was as deep in love with her as a man could be, and it had been with the greatest difficulty that he had obeyed her injunction not to call upon her.

His anxiety for her safety still continued, and as the



day he expected to hear from her approached it deepened until he became a prey to morbid fancies and forebodings of evil. On the night of the twentieth he could not sleep, but rose soon after dawn, and waited in a state of miserable apprehension till the hour of the first delivery of letters.

He was hardly surprised when the postman declared he had nothing for him, and acting on a sudden impulse he went straight to the railway station and took a train to town. He could not bring himself to wait for the second delivery.

But he was not prepared for the news he heard from Ursula's landlady—that Miss Beritza had gone away and left no address.

"But she may come back?" asked the doctor, trying to conceal his anxiety.

"Oh, no! The young lady's not coming back. She's took her trunks with her and given up the rooms, which they're to let at present."

"And she left no letter, no message for any one?"

"No, sir, nothing. Good morning, sir." And the woman closed the door before he could frame another question.

It was of no use to insist upon putting more queries, for the woman evidently knew no more then she had said; and Stanford turned away from the door, his heart filled with apprehension.



Then he remembered that possibly he might hear something of her from M. Lobieski. The mere hope cheered him like a cordial. First he went to a restaurant and got some breakfast, for by this time he was faint from want of food; and then he went back to his own village.

Fortunately there were no very serious cases of illness among Dr. Stanford's patients that morning; and before noon he was on his way to the Manor House. He knew Lobieski by sight, having seen him pass in at the Manor House gate more than once since the time of his meeting with Ursula. However, he soon learned, to his intense disappointment, that M. Lobieski was not at home, that letters were not forwarded to him, and that the date of his return was quite uncertain.

Rachel, as she gave these unsatisfactory replies to Stanford's question, could not help feeling sorry for him. She saw the anxiety in his face, and suspected at once Ursula was the cause of it; for she had seen the impression the girl had made on the young surgeon. He noticed her look of sympathy, and said, as he was turning away,—

"By the way, I hope the lady I attended here has quite recovered?"

"Oh, yes. I believe so."

"I suppose you don't know where she is staying at present?"

Rachel hesitated. She feared she had no right to speak

of Miss Beritza to one who was almost a stranger to her.

"I can't say I do, sir," was the answer.

A ray of hope lit up the doctor's face.

"Come, I see you do know something of her movements," he said with a smile. "She has left the address she gave me in London and——." His fingers went into his waistcoat pocket; but a look in Rachel's face warned him that that was not the way to proceed. "I believe you have a friendly feeling towards Miss Beritza," he went on; "and I assure you you would be doing her a good turn—or, at any rate, not an ill one, by giving me her address."

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you," said the woman, moving the door so as almost to close it.

"Listen to me one moment, please," said the doctor earnestly. "I have Miss Beritza's interest at heart. She told me something of her position. She has many difficulties, dangers perhaps, to contend with. She needs some one to help her, and she has no one. I want to be of use to her if I can. Indeed I do. What possible interest can I have in injuring her?"

Rachel's face softened.

"I don't suppose you would injure the young lady, sir; indeed, you were very kind to her that night she was ill. I daresay you saved her life. But that doesn't give me a right to tell you what she might wish kept secret."

"Quite true. But I am very anxious about her. See



here." He drew a letter-case from his pocket, and took from it Ursula's note. I daresay you know Miss Beritza's handwriting. She sent me this a month ago, just to let me know that she was well. She promised to let me hear from her again in a month's time, and she has not kept her promise. I am afraid there is something the matter. She may be ill."

"She was well enough last week," said Rachel.

"You saw her only last week? Did she tell you where she was going?"

"Well, yes, she was goiug a long way."

"Not to Russia?"

Rachel's face showed that the guess was right.

"But that may be dangerous for her!" cried the doctor. "She must have had some strong reason for going to that country. Did she tell you what town she was going to?"

"Why do you wish to know?"

"Because I mean to follow her."

"You! Do you mean that you would go yourself to Russia?"

The doctor nodded.

"Why?"

"Because—because she may be running into danger. You are a Russian yourself, are you not?"

"No, I am a Pole!"

"I beg your pardon. But as you come from Poland

you can understand that it may be imprudent for Miss Beritza to go to Russia at all. Besides, she has enemies, as we know. I wish to follow her, so that I may be near her, in case of her needing help. Will you not tell me where I can find her?"

"Miss Beritza told me she was going to Birtova. I cannot say more. Perhaps I have already said too much."

And without waiting for a word of thanks Rachel shut the door.

Stanford immediately set off for Rustingham, the next village to the one in which he lived, for the purpose of seeing a fellow-surgeon named Mansel, with whom he was on rather intimate terms. He arrived as his friend was sitting down to an early dinner.

"Just in time to join me!" cried Mansel, his jolly red face beaming over with satisfaction, as he caught sight of Stanford. The invitation was a welcome one, for now that Stanford's anxiety was to some extent allayed, he had time to think how hungry he was. Little was said until the meal was over, and pipes were lit.

"How is it that you are at home at this hour?" asked Stanford, regarding his friend through a cloud of smoke.

Mansel's jolly face assumed a comical expression of melancholy.

"The people are so disgustingly well in this neighbourhood," said he, "that I might as well spend my days in bed. I should be very little missed."



"That encourages me," said Stanford, to ask a favour. "I wish you would look after my patients for a few weeks. I am going to take a holiday."

"My dear boy. I shall be delighted. It will give me something to do, and I shall be able to try a few experiments. I never try new drugs on my own patients. They're too valuable."

Stanford laughed, "Which are—the drugs or the patients? Well,

I'm afraid my 'run' won't give you much scope," "but I warn you that I may be away for some time."

"The longer the better. If you don't come back at all so much the better. My practice wants enlarging, and I could absorb yours easily. But where are you going?"

"I think of going to Russia."

"Good heavens, man, what is taking you there?"

Stanford paused for a moment or two before replying. His first impulse was to turn off the inquiry with a joke, but he reflected that it would be as well that before he left England he should confide in somebody. If he should be arrested and thrown into prison, it might be better that some one should be able to make inquiries in the proper quarter. Mansel, he knew, had a kind heart and a large fund of common sense. He might as well know the truth.

"Well, my dear fellow," he said, "the fact is, I want to look after a friend of mine who may possibly want a helping hand."



"A lady?"

"Yes."

Mansel blew a long, long whistle.

"Thought you wouldn't be going all the way to Siberia to lend a helping hand to a mere man," he observed.

"Not Siberia—Russia. Have you an atlas?"

"There's an old one in that corner," said Mansel, pointing to the bookcase with the stem of his pipe.

Stanford rose and got it.

"What's your town?"

"Birtova. Here it is, in the province of Volhynia, about fifty miles from the boundary of Galicia."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Well, you see, the lady, Miss Beritza, comes of a family of revolutionists. At least her brother had those ideas, and I fancy she shares them. Besides, she has private enemies; and, in a word, I don't like her being there all alone."

"Naturally you don't."

"There's no saying what sort of customers I may have to deal with out there," said Stanford, after a little pause. "I wonder whether I should take a revolver with me?"

"I should do nothing of the sort," said Mansel, emphatically. "A deadly weapon is more likely to get you into trouble with the authorities than to be of any



real service. It always tells against a man when there is a row, if a revolver is found on him; and quite right too. Then there is always a temptation to use it unnecessarily. No, no. Trust to your fists, and a blackthorn stick if you like, to save your head, and leave the six-shooters to soldiers and semi-barbarians."

"I believe you are right, Mansel. You generally are. I will follow your advice. Good-bye, then; and a thousand thanks for taking over my patients. I'll send you a list of them, with notes of their cases, by post. I start to-morrow."

Stanford was as good as his word. He left London next day, and on the twenty-fifth of May arrived at his destination.

With the exception of the church and a few of the houses, Birtova is quite a modern town. It is not a populous place, there being few manufactures; but it is the centre of a large agricultural district, and the convict prison gives the town a gloomy character of its own.

When Stanford arrived it was late in the evening. All he could do that night was to inspect the hotel register, and put a few general questions to the waiter. The register told him nothing; the waiter's answers left him just as wise as he was before.

Next day he went out into the town. The most prominent building, next to the great fortress-like goal, was the church—an ancient, venerable pile, standing

among the mean-looking brick houses like a solitary rock on the sea shore. The church was of great size, and stood in the midst of an open square, which was surrounded by houses, some of them large and comparatively handsome, but the majority moderate in size, and of homely appearance.

The steps leading up to the church from the square the church porch, and indeed every available corner where rest and shade could be had, swarmed with beggars. To the young Englishman they were a repulsive set, but there was no doubt about their poverty, and as he could not help distributing among them the smaller coins in his pocket, he quickly become known among these children of poverty as "the good Englishman."

Very cautiously, and without mentioning her name, Stanford enquired for Ursula, speaking of her as a young English lady. But all his enquiries were in vain. Nobody at all answering to his description had been seen at Birtova within the last few weeks. His anxiety increased, but he tried to believe that she had broken her journey at some point, and would arrive before long. Much of his time he spent in patrolling the streets, the railway station, the churches and picture gallery, but it was all to no purpose. He was forced to come to the conclusion that Ursula had either never reached Birtova, or had left before his arrival.

CHAPTER XXII

In Hiding

Among the halt the lame and the blind who lounged all day about the steps of the Church of St Michael—the church in the great Square of Birtova—was one beggar who had more than once attracted Dr. Stanford's attention. He was not, like most of the others, old and decrepit, but a large man in the prime of life, clad in rags, with long matted hair, and a sullen expression of countenance. His title to public sympathy was the state of his right arm. The shoulder and upper part of the limb were covered with a dreadful looking sore, the effect, it was supposed, of a burn. His coat hung loosely over the arm, which was swathed in dirty bandages. These he would sometimes remove to excite the pity of the passers-by; but for the most part he seemed too lazy or too ill to bestir himself to seek alms, but would lie by the hour in the shade of the church porch watching what was going

on, but taking no part in the talk of the motley crew around him.

It struck Stanford that perhaps he might be able to relieve the poor fellow's sufferings; so one day, taking with him a waiter from the hotel to act as interpreter, (for he oniy knew a word or two of Russian), he went to the Square, and found the beggar he was in search of. With the waiter's assistance he told him that he was a doctor, and that he was willing to try to cure his arm. The beggar seemed unwilling that his arm should be touched, but Stanford gently insisted, and at length the bandages were removed. The appearance of the sore surprised the English surgeon. It seemed only skin deep, and he could find no cause for the inflammation that existed. Then a thought struck him. He picked up the filthy bandage, and found that instead of a healing ointment the poor wretch was applying an irritant to the wound.

With an angry exclamation Stanford flung the rag from him, and turned on the beggar.

"You fool!" he cried, forgetting that the man was a Russian, "do you know what you are doing? You may hurt yourself seriously, and perhaps lose your arm if you persist in doing this much longer. I've a great mind to inform the police—but I suppose they wouldn't think anything of it. A great, strong fellow like you—why can't you work?"



The man muttered something in his native tongue, his scowling face turned to the pavement.

"What does he say?" demanded Stanford of the waiter.

"He says if he has got a salve that does not please your excellency, that is his own affair," said the waiter with a grin.

The young surgeon burst into a loud laugh.

He looked round at the small crowd that had collected, and saw that public opinion was against him. Among the others was a child, not one of the begging fraternity, a girl of perhaps twelve years old, who, Stanford noticed, watched him while he was speaking, as if she understood what he said. Her fine eyes were full of intelligence, and turned with a look of amusement, first on the beggar-man, and then on the doctor.

"Tell him," he said to the waiter, "that if he does not change his ointment he will in all probability lose his limb. He may set up blood-poisoning, and die of it."

Then, as he turned away, he reflected that after all he had, in the beggar's opinion, done him a bad turn, and he weakly dropped two or three "tchetvertaks"—the coin is worth about sixpence—into the man's hat as it lay on the ground.

"Take my advice, and give up this lazy life," said the doctor at parting; "and have some mercy on that poor arm of yours."

His counsel was thrown away, however. As Stanford passed through the Square later in the day, he saw the beggar sitting in his old corner.

It was nearly dusk that evening, and the doctor had left his hotel for a short stroll before dinner, when he heard a soft voice say in very fair English—

"May I speak with you, sir?"

He turned sharply round and saw that it was a young girl who had addressed him—the same girl who had been listening to him as he spoke to the beggar in the Square that afternoon.

"Certainly. What do you want?" said Stanford.

"You are a doctor, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Will you come, then, and see my grandmother, out of charity?"

"Well, I don't know," said the Englishman, with a smile. "I didn't come here to set up as a rival to local talent, which I have no doubt is able to cope with the case. But there—is the old lady really ill?"

"She is very ill, sir. She cannot walk."

"All right, my child. Lead the way."

The girl went on to the poorer quarter of the town, Stanford following. After passing through several streets they reached the bank of the river which flows through the town; and the girl stopped at one of the houses in the street facing the river. It was an old house



dirty and forlorn-looking. She knocked at the door, and it was opened by a youth of sixteen or seventeen, evidently her brother.

A few words passed between them in Russian, and the doctor was taken into an inner room, where he found an aged woman doubled up with rheumatism. After prescribing some simple remedies which he said he would procure for her, he was leaving the room when the girl said to him,—

"As you are here, will you be so very good and kind as to see an old man upstairs who is weak and ill, for charity?"

Stanford smiled at the way in which the two last words were emphasised. It seemed as if the speaker had been instructed to make that point quite clear.

"I say, you know, I didn't bargain for this," said the surgeon good-humouredly. "However, in for a penny, in for a pound. Since I am here, I may as well go up and see the man."

The girl tripped lightly up a step-ladder to a sort of loft which formed the upper flat of the cottage, and there on a low truckle bed lay an elderly man, who was evidently in a very weak state of health. Pale and emaciated, his eyes glittered with an unnatural brilliance. His limbs were feeble, his breath short and uncertain.

"There is nothing organically wrong with him," said Stanford to the girl after a brief examination. He wants

a good tonic and good food, and above all, fresh air. Let him go out every day."

"Go out every day! echoed the sick man.

The doctor started, for he spoke in English, and he looked at the patient more closely.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "It's not possible. And yet—I could have sworn. Tell me, are you M. Lobieski?"

A change came over the old man's face. He seemed to be hesitating whether he should acknowledge the truth or not.

"You know me, then?" he said, at last. "May I ask who you are?"

"My name is Stanford. I am a surgeon, and I live within a mile of your house in England."

The Jew was so amazed that he could hardly articulate.

"What brings you here?" he gasped.

Stanford glanced at the young girl.

"Marcella is a woman," said the Jew, bending a grateful look on her, "and she is to be trusted in all things. But I beg your pardon. Leave us for a few minutes, my dear."

The girl went down the step-ladder, and Lobieski turned an enquiring glance on his visitor.

"I came," said the doctor, "to seek Miss Beritza and if necessary to protect her.

"Miss Beritza here! She is in London!"

"Your servant, the same women who called me in to attend Miss Beritza when she was taken ill in your house——"

"Yes, I remember—Rachel—go on!"

"She told me Miss Beritza had come here."

"And has she? Have you seen her?"

"No, I have not been able to hear any news of her."

"Good heavens! Did you make enquiries of the police?"

"Indirectly I did—not by name."

"But it doesn't matter. Poor girl! When did she leave London?"

"A week before I did, and I have been here more than a week."

The Jew groaned aloud, and twisted his bony fingers round each other in his excitement. "Poor girl—poor girl!" he moaned. "Do you know what her object was in coming here?"

"No; but I suppose it had something to do with her brother. He is in prison."

"But not here. They sent him to Siberia. Still it is possible that that information was wrong. No matter. Poor girl! So young! I would have given every rouble I possess if this had not happened."

"What is it you fear?" asked Stanford. He spoke with a resolute air, but he was white to the lips.

"Fear! What is there to fear in this accursed country

but the Government? I am very much afraid that that poor girl has done something to bring her within the reach of Russian law. They have trapped her—or I am much mistaken—and she is now lying in a prison cell."

Stanford tried to speak. He could not utter a word. His heart was beating as though he must burst a blood-vessel, and he felt as if he were choking.

"If I had only been at home, to advise her!" cried Lobieski. "No doubt she came to me for advice, or to bid me farewell. That was how Rachel came to know where she had gone. You went to my house, did you not?"

"Yes. I went to see you, and ask whether you knew where Miss Beritza had gone."

"When was that?"

"Nearly a fortnight ago."

"Rachel knew, then, where I was."

"She assured me she did not."

"Can that woman have intercepted my letter?" said the old man, as if speaking to himself.

"You mean Madame Fabrini?"

"Yes. What do you know of her?"

"She is the person I suspected of poisoning Miss Beritza."

"Ah! I have my suspicions too; and I kept the woman on purpose that through her I might find out who had corrupted her. But I could not have foreseen what has happened."



"I hardly understand you," said the doctor. "Why do you remain here? You are not really ill, except for want of good food, air, and exercise."

"I know that. But I believe I may safely confide in you. Indeed I must. You must know, then, that the Russian Government does me the honour of ranking me as a suspect. Perhaps they have cause. At any rate, the Government and I are enemies. Some weeks ago I came from London to St. Petersburg on business; and at the very frontier I found out that the police were watching for me! I cannot conceive how they could have known that I was coming, so few were aware of the fact."

Here the old man seemed to forget his companion, and lapse into a fit of musing. Stanford made a slight movement, and Lobieski started, begged the doctor's pardon, and went on.

"With a great deal of risk and difficulty I transacted the business which had brought me to St. Petersburg; and then I came on here. I had hardly arrived, however, before I found that the police had been warned, and were on the look-out for me. The houses of my friends were repeatedly searched; and in fact the chase was so keen that I was forced to have recourse to this little den."

As he spoke Lobieski pushed the wooden wall behind his bed with his hand. To the doctor's amazement part of it swung back, disclosing a recess of tolerable height, but so narrow that a man could barely lie in it.

"This space is really part of a lean-to shed built outside," continued the Jew; "and as the two partitions are exactly similar it cannot be discovered, except by taking measurements or breaking into the wall."

"You don't mean to say you lived in that hole?" cried Stanford.

"For the last three weeks I have hardly left it," answered Lobieski. "The watch has been so strictly kept up that I dared not go downstairs, much less attempt to leave the town."

"No wonder you look pale and weak. At your age it must be a frightful ordeal."

"The little girl who fetched you," said the Jew, "told us that she had seen a doctor in the Square, who spoke English. She has been taught a little of the language. I thought I could trust an Englishman; and I told her to ask you to pay her grandmother a visit out of charity, because, I argued, if he is good-natured enough to do that he will take a message from me to my friends in England."

"I shall be very willing to do so," said Stanford, "when I return. But I must stay here some little time longer. It is possible that Miss Beritza may come yet."

Lobieski had not the heart to say that his hope was vain, but Stanford read as much in his face.

"I will see you again," he said, rising as he spoke. "You have talked quite as much as is good for you."



"One question before you go," said the old man, laying a wasted hand on the doctor's sleeve, "May I ask what is the reason that you followed Miss Beritza to this remote corner of the world?"

"The reason? I love her," said Stanford simply.

He had barely reached the bottom of the step-ladder on his way out, when he heard a great commotion at the street door.

"Open, in the name of the Czar!" shouted a voice like the roar of a wild beast; and some furious blows were rained on the door, threatening to break it in.

Marcella, guiding the doctor with her eyes, fumbled with the lock, while Stanford stepped to the bedside of the old woman in the inner room.

The outer door was opened after a few seconds delay, and half a dozen gendarmes came in. Their leader seemed surprised seeing Stanford calmly feeling the old creature's pulse. He poured out a torrent of questions in Russian, to which the Englishman replied by shaking his head with a deprecatory smile.

"Do you speak French?" asked the doctor in his turn.

"A little. Why did you come here?" answered the officer in that language.

"I am a medical man, as you will perceive from this," he said, holding out his passport, "and I came to visit this patient. But she doesn't understand French or English,



and I can't speak Russian. Will you kindly explain to her that she must use the liniment I shall send her every two hours, and that I will call to-morrow?"

The officer turned away with a curse and ordered one of the men up the step-ladder. By that time, however, Lobieski had had plenty of time to retire to his hiding-place; and Stanford, having waited long enough to assure himself that the old man had not been taken by surprise, returned to his hotel.



CHAPTER XXIII

Face To Face

On the day following his meeting with Lobieski, Stanford was passing through a short street which connected the Place in which his hotel was situated with the great Square, when he observed the sturdy beggar whom he had unmasked the day before shuffling along towards him. The man seemed to avoid his eye, at which the young doctor was in no way astonished; but he did feel some surprise when the fellow in passing drew close to him, and endeavoured to thrust something into his hand. The doctor drew back, and then the beggar threw him a look so keen, so imperative, so full of meaning, that he was fairly astounded. Before he could recover his self-possession the vagrant had thrust a small, hard article into his hand, and passed on.

Stanford closed his hand on the object, and found it was a note, folded up quite small. Suspecting that this

might be a message from Lobieski, and thinking that it might be well not to read the note in the street, the Englishman slipped the letter into his pocket, and continued his walk for a few minutes; then returning to the hotel he went up to his own room, took out the note, and began to read it.

It was well that Stanford had taken these precautions, for no sooner did his eyes rest on the first lines of the writing than a cry escaped his lips, and he gazed at the paper like one transported with joy and amazement.

The letter was from Ursula Beritza.

"Is it possible, my friend, that you have followed me all the way from England, on the chance of being of service to me? I could not believe it, were it not that I have seen you to-day passing through the Square; and I can hardly suppose that it is by accident that you are here, in this out-of-the-way Russian town. I fear that my negligence in forgetting to write to you, as I promised to do, on the 21st of May, has been the cause of your taking this long and toilsome journey. But if you knew the state of agitation, of anxiety, of doubt, in which I was at that time, you would forgive me. You will ask why I came here, and why it is that I am concealing myself. These questions and any others you choose to put I will answer if you care to come and see me. If you do come let it be after dusk, and take care that you are not followed. Go to the church of St. Michael, and walk



along the western side of the Square, till you pass the church. Stop at the last house before you come to the first opening from the Square on your left, the corner house. If the Square is quite empty, and you feel sure that you have not been followed from your hotel, open the door—do not knock—open the door and go straight in. You will find me waiting for you.

"You once offered me not only your friendship but your help in time of difficulty and danger. If you are inclined to repeat the offer now I will accept it gladly, for I am sorely in need of help. You see I am frank. Necessity has been my teacher. If I am mistaken, if you have not come here in search of me, or if you are disinclined to repeat an offer made in a moment of generous excitement, burn this, and forget—Your unfortunate patient,—URSULA."

A great wave of joy and thankfulness surged up in Stanford's heart as he read this letter. He paced up and down his narrow bedroom in a state of uncontrollable excitement. To know that Ursula was at liberty, to think that he should see her and speak to her in a few hours' time, was too much happiness. Then he could not fail to notice, (as soon as his mind was able to admit a second thought,) how the icy barrier of reserve behind which the girl had entrenched herself had melted under the double influence of her peril and of his own evident devotion to her. She wrote to him almost as if he

were an old friend; she appeared to be ready to tell him all the secrets of her life. A hundred times he blessed the impulse which had led him not to rest content till he had traced her to Birtova, and which had forbade his returning to England, in the hope that she might yet reach the town.

A second and a third time he read the letter through, and then he went out to inspect from the outside the house in which his Ursula had found a shelter. Passing slowly along the opposite side of the Square, he was able to look at it narrowly without attracting any attention. He found it easily—the corner house of the first opening into the Square on the left. It was quite an ordinary building, small and mean-looking like its neighbours, only two stories in height. The back street joined the Square at an acute angle; and this house was what is sometimes called a "gusset-house," being the one in the angle of the V formed by the Square and the back street. It had a small building, which might be a tool shed or a stable, on the narrow piece of ground at the back. There was nothing noticeable about the aspect of the house as seen from the Square.

Stanford returned to his hotel, and waited in a state of feverish impatience, for the dusk. At length he thought it would be safe to venture. After passing through one or two empty streets, to make sure that no one was following him, he went down the back street and approached the



house from that quarter. Turning sharply round the corner, he reached the front of the house, and without knocking opened the door and went in.

He found himself in a small square hall. Right in front of him was a narrow staircase, and in front also, but rather to the right, was a door, which, judging from its position under the stairs, led to a cellar. On the right-hand side of a little hall were two doors, leading as he supposed, to a kitchen at the back, and a front sitting-room. On the left there was only the partition wall of the adjoining house.

As Stanford's eye was taking in these details, a soft voice called him from above. He sprang upstairs, and in a second or two he was standing in a small room furnished as a sitting-room, with Ursula before him, holding her hands in his own! The strangeness of the meeting kept them both silent. At last they spoke, but neither of them could afterwards remember what were the broken, incoherent words that first fell from their lips. When Stanford came to himself, as it were, he was seated on a sofa, and Ursula was sitting on a low chair at a little distance, telling him how she had received a letter from her brother, and how she was endeavouring to carry out his instructions, and was daily expecting to hear that he had effected his escape. She looked thin and pale, the effect, no doubt, of the confinement she was submitting to and the anxiety she had been suffering;

but no pallor could dim the delicate beauty of her face, or quench the tender light in her eyes.

"On my way here," Ursula was saying. "I fell in with a working-man, a Russian named Goloffski, whom I knew to be a Nihilist. I ought to tell you that I belong to the Society myself, though I have never taken any active part in its operations. I was, in a manner, forced to join it, in order that I might get a message my brother had sent me. Well, I found that Goloffski was coming to Birtova in order to see his relations, so I arranged that we should travel together. He knew he was running into danger; and one or two little incidents had made me think that I would be in some danger myself. For one thing, it was not clear to me how my brother's letter had reached me. Goloffski had been the means of my getting the former message; but he knew nothing of this letter. So I decided that I would follow Goloffski's example, and assume another surname, as well as a disguise, before entering Russia. We stopped a day or two at the frontier to make our arrangements, and when we appeared in Birtova, I was an old lady of sixty-five, with snow-white hair and a wrinkled face, while Goloffski figured as my coachman. It was easy for him in that character to procure two horses for me. They are saddled and bridled in the stable at this moment. As for my carriage, it is away for repairs—so Goloffski told the neighbours. We took this house



furnished for a month, soon after our arrival; and as soon as Goloffski had brought the horses and hired a boy to attend to them and exercise them, he left me."

"Then who saddles them every night?" asked the doctor.

"I do, assisted by my servant—a girl I sent to Beritza for, and on whom I can depend absolutely."

"Then who is to meet your brother when he escapes?"

"Goloffski. Alexis laid the greatest stress upon some one patrolling the Square constantly, in case of his failing to find our agent, and so being unable to change his clothes. But on account of the police this was a difficult, in fact, an impracticable task. So, without saying a word to me, Goloffski, brave fellow that he is, actually produced a sore on his right arm, that he might become known as a homeless waif, and thus have an excuse for making the church porch, or some other corner about the Square, his sleeping-place at night. In this summer weather, that is no great hardship; but it goes to my heart to think of the wound on the poor fellow's arm!

"Every night we are expecting that my brother will appear in the Square. Goloffski will know him by his prison dress; and they will use a countersign. It will take less than a minute to bring him here; and as soon as Alexis can change his clothes we will be gone."

"God grant you success!" cried the doctor.

"Amen!" said the girl, gravely.

There was a moment's pause, and then she asked, "How did you think of coming here after me? And how did you find me?"

Stanford told her of the visits he had paid, first to her lodgings in town, and then to the Manor House; and Urusla listened in silence.

"Did Rachel tell you about Madame Fabrini's telegram?" she asked, when he had finished.

"No. What was that?"

"We learned that the day before I went to see M. Lobieski———"

"I had forgotten!" exclaimed Stanford, with a start. "Your friend is here. I saw him yesterday."

"Here! Is it possible?"

"Yes; he is in hiding, but perhaps we may contrive a meeting between you and him. What were you going to say?"

"Only that on the day before I went to see him, the woman Fabrini had received a telegram—I have no doubt from my cousin, Count Borovitchi—telling her that she must at all costs prevent M. Lobieski and me from meeting. Now, what inference should you draw from that?"

"That your cousin thought Lobieski might have returned."



"True. But why should he be anxious that we should not meet? Does it not look as if he thought I should be likely to wish to see my friend about that time?"

"Well, yes, it does, rather."

"Then the inference would be that my cousin knew that I was thinking of coming to Russia?"

"I think that is pushing the thing too far," said the doctor, with a smile. "He may have had a dozen reasons for wishing to prevent a conference between you and Lobieski. But how did you know I was in the town?"

"Goloffski came to me in great alarm last night, and told me how an English doctor had drawn public attention to him, and exposed his imposture. He described him, and I thought it was just possible it might be you." The sweetest of blushes spread over the girl's face as she said this. "So I looked out for you this morning, and I found I was right. I sent Goloffski the note for you, in a plate of broken meat, and told him to give it to you —that you were a friend of mine, and that he need fear no further interference from you."

"Do you know," said the doctor, suddenly, "I hardly like that part of your plan which provides for your brother's being brought here as soon as he is free from the prison. What if he were to be pursued? You might be fatally compromised. Why not let me watch the prison during the earlier part of the night—it is light at three now, so the watch need not be a long one—meet

your brother, and take him to some lodging which I could take on purpose, or to the house where Lobieski is hiding? Or I could start off with him immediately on foot. I don't like his coming here."

"Thank you, Mr. Stanford, you are more than kind. You are generosity itself. You would risk your liberty—for helping a prisoner to escape is an offence in every country, is it not?—to aid a man you have never seen!"

"But he is your brother," murmured the doctor.

"Thank you a hundred times, but I think it will be best to stick to our original plan. It is all arranged, and is perfectly simple, and perfectly comprehended by us all. My brother and I are both quite at home in the saddle; and we hope that within an hour of our starting we shall be practically beyond the reach of pursuit."

"Not in these days of telegraphs," said Stanford, rising as he spoke.

"It is late," said Ursula. "We must stick to our plan for to-night at any rate."

"May I come to-morrow evening and try to persuade you to change it for mine?"

"To-morrow—yes. But it must be your last visit, our last interview, till we meet in happy England. The eyes of the police are everywhere. Your visits would be reported, and suspicions might be aroused if you were to come a third time. Till to-morrow, then, good-night."



CHAPTER XXIV

In the Prison

While this conversation was taking place between Stanford and Ursula, Alexis Beritza was pacing up and down his cell with quick, impatient strides. His handsome, refined countenance was pale as death, and his burning dark eyes were staring straight before him. His arms were folded tightly across his chest, as if to repress forcibly the wild beating of his heart, and his thin white fingers showed on his arms like the fingers of a skeleton. He was, indeed, little more than skin and bone, for his food had been so coarse that he could eat but little, and the want of fresh air and proper exercise had sapped his strength.

Now, however, he was possessed of a feverish energy that made restraint a positive torture; for his gaoler, Sindorff, had hinted to him that he might perhaps find that night a favourable opportunity for trying to make his escape.



Every morning since the beginning of the month Alexis had plied him with questions, urging him to carry out his promise without delay; but the man had always answered that the time had not come yet—an exceptionally vigilant officer, he would say, was in charge of the guard, or for some other reason the attempt must be postponed. Alexis had grown so nervous with suspense, that at one time he had feared that his nerve would fail him at the critical moment. But that fear had passed away. The hope that that very night might see him a free man had excited him to a painful degree at first; but the hours of solitude he had passed during the day had calmed him, and now, in spite of his eagerness, he felt cool enough to face any emergency.

A heavy step was heard on the stone floor of the corridor. It was the warder making his last round for the night. One door after another was opened, and after a short pause shut and locked again. Alexis stood in silence in the middle of his cell. At length the flashes of light seen through the spy-hole in the upper part of the door became brighter. The step outside drew near. The cell-door was opened and thrown back.

"Well?" said Alexis, his voice hoarse with excitement.

"I think it may be done to-night," said the turnkey, lowering his tone to a whisper. The man's upright carriage and stiff mechanical movements proclaimed him

to be a soldier. The heavy, stolid cast of his countenance told that he was a Russian. His eyes did not meet those of his prisoner. He kept them on the floor.

"And the guard?" asked the Pole, anxiously.

"I have an old military greatcoat," said Sindorff, "which I will leave hanging over the railing, near the end of the corridor. You will find a military cap in one of the pockets. With these on you can pass the sentry and the gatekeeper easily enough. If you are challenged, say you have been with the Governor, and offer the men a trifle to drink—half a rouble, perhaps, not more. As for the guard, I'll undertake that they shall be too intent on their cards to care what is going on outside."

"A thousand thanks, my good fellow!" cried Alexis. "Nothing could be better!"

"And the five hundred roubles?" said the turnkey, with a sidelong glance at the prisoner.

"I told my sister, when I wrote to her, to bring that sum. I will hand it over to you as soon as I see her." He stopped abruptly. The mere thought of being at liberty, of seeing his sister and talking to her, took away his breath.

"But that won't do," said Sindorff, uneasily, shifting from one foot to the other. "I may do all you can expect of me, and the attempt may fail. You may be arrested in the street, or after you leave the town, but



before you get out of the country. In that case, am I to get nothing?"

"The reward will be payable if you do your part, even if I should never escape beyond these walls."

"But in that case how am I to get the money? Your Excellency could not pay me."

"That is true," said Alexis, his face becoming a shade paler as the possibility of failure was thus forced upon him. "Stay a moment—I will give you a note to my sister."

He went to a small deal table in a corner of his cell, on which were placed pen and ink and a few sheets of paper, and wrote an order for the payment to Nicholas Sindorff of five hundred roubles.

"Where shall I find the lady?" asked the man.

"Good heavens! How can I tell you her address at this moment? I hope she is in Birtova, but I do not know. You managed to send my letter to her, you tell me. Surely you can send her that order in the same way."

The turnkey said no more, but placed the order for five hundred roubles carefully in his pocket.

"Between eleven and twelve to-night," said he, speaking with his eyes on the floor, and his face turned towards the corridor, away from the young count, "I will come and unlock the door of your cell. But you must not stir for an hour after I am gone. You can then



go out, but be careful first to put your bolster and other things in the bed, so that any one glancing through the 'Judas-hole' may suppose you to be asleep. Close the cell-door carefully after you. Go along the corridor till you come to the great central staircase. There you will find the greatcoat and cap, hanging over a small railing in a recess to your right. Go boldly down the staircase, and I will manage that a small glass door at the end of the right-hand corridor will be left open. Go down the passage, and you will come to a window with iron bars.

"On the sill you will find a file with a cork on the end of it to deaden the sound. The bars are not strong; you will soon be able to break or bend one of them. Before you drop through the window you must listen for the tread of the sentry, and wait till you can hear it no longer. Then he will have passed round the corner. Take off your boots and drop down—it is no great height. Then turn to the left, and you will pass through an iron gate. You will then be in the Governor's quarters; and no one will be surprised at seeing you come from there. Go straight across the little flower-garden, and a wicket-gate will bring you to the sentry and the great gate."

"But the overcoat," objected the count. "It will look very odd to wear an overcoat at this time of year.

"Say that you have been sent with despatches, and are going a long journey. That will be better than saying that you have been dining with the Governor. I



will put a sealed envelope into a pocket of the overcoat, if I can get hold of one of the right sort. That should quiet the gatekeeper. If he wants to see your permit to leave the prison, say you forgot to ask for it, but that you dare not disturb the Governor at that hour, and give him a whole rouble. That will settle it. You have a few roubles left, haven't you?"

"Yes; I have a few roubles left—no thanks to you," the Count added, under his breath.

"I must go now. Remember, do not leave your cell until half-past twelve."

The turnkey abruptly went out, locked the door, and proceeded to the next cell in the corridor. When he had finished his rounds he went to the Governor's room to hand in his nightly report, and knocked at the door.

A soft voice called out,

"Come in!"

The warder entered, but stopped short on seeing a stranger, who was, indeed, none other than Colonel Brinski, sitting opposite the Governor.

"Come in, you lout, and shut the door," said Captain Ignatieff, without raising his voice by the fraction of a tone. The man obeyed, stepped forward and saluted.

Captain Ignatieff was a small man, with pale delicate features. His movements were as gentle and deliberate as a cat's. To an unobservant stranger he would have passed for a mild-tempered, inoffensive man. Only one



skilled in physiognomy would have noticed the signs of iron determination in the boldly cut nose and powerful chin, or the mark of cruelty in the thin lips and steely blue eyes.

"You may speak freely before this gentleman," said the Governor, waving his cigar in the direction of the Colonel.

"I have to report all well, your Excellency," said the warder.

"Well, anything more?"

Sindorff's face, in spite of its habitual stolidity, wore an expression of embarrassment as he answered in a low tone—

"One of the prisoners means to escape to-night."

"The one you told me of—Beritza?"

"The same, your Excellency."

When?"

"Between eleven and one."

"How?"

He made me promise to leave out a military overcoat. He will squeeze himself through the bars of the window at the end of the western Corridor, and pass the sentries pretending to be a messenger from your Excellency. They ought to be warned before-hand."

"Good. You have managed this very well, Sindorff. If the thing comes off all right you shall have a step up the ladder. You may go now." The gaolor saluted and



retired. "What a cautious diplomatist he is!" exclaimed Ignatieff, with a cynical smile. "No one hearing him just now would have imagined that I had any previous knowledge of this intended escape."

"Then the thing has been all arranged beforehand?" asked Brinski.

"Oh, for some weeks," said the Governor, flicking the ash off his cigar

"And can you tell me the reason of this elaborate plot against the poor devil?"

"Well it's a long story. You never heard how it was that Beritza left the army so suddenly?"

"Not I."

It was because he had the impudence to fall in love with the daughter of a certain Grand Duke, who happened to be in command of the division to which Beritza belonged. The fellow had actually planned an elopement when the Grand Duke found it out. Of course he was furious, and the young man had to leave the army at once. But the Grand Duke is what some people would call a vindictive man. He was overjoyed when Beritza was arrested, but deeply disappointed when it turned out that he was not condemned to the mines—his offence did not warrant that—but only to ordinary exile in Siberia. It was certainly by the Duke's influence that his deportation to Siberia has been delayed. And now he is to be tempted to escape in order that his punishment may be



more in accordance with what his highly-placed enemy thinks desirable."

Colonel Brinski uttered a snort of indignation.

Ignatieff looked at him curiously.

"Such cases are by no means rare, I assure you," he said. "But this girl—Beritza's sister—can you tell me why the Government are so anxious that *she* should be arrested?"

"I believe I can," said Brinski, reddening slightly. "In the first place I know her to be a Nihilist. But that is not the main reason. Shortly after Beritza was condemned the family estates were declared forfeited, under a ukase which legalises the forfeiture of the estates of persons condemned for certain offences. And then it turned out that the estates—which are now very valuable owing to the discovery of minerals upon them—had never belonged to the young Count. They belonged to the old man who was never brought to trial, and he bequeathed them to his daughter. So that if she were to put forward a claim in the proper quarter, or to sell them to a purchaser strong enough to fight for them, the Government would practically be forced to surrender them. All this came out through the persistent pestering of a relative who wanted to get the estates for himself. I learned that the young Countess was a Nihilist, and reported the fact; but I have done no more, beyond furnishing my department with the lady's

address in London. Where is she now?"

"She ought to be here, in Birtova; but our police assure me that she is not. Never mind; when this young cock leaves the prison to-night he will lead us straight into her arms."

Colonel Brinski jumped up from his chair and began to walk up and down the room. His face wore an unmistakable expression of disgust and contempt.

"Upon my word," he began, "If I had known—"

"Take care, Colonel, how you animadvert on the proceedings of our benevolent Government. Besides," he added, maliciously, "I have a special interest in the success of the scheme, seeing that I devised it. I flatter myself it is rather neat. Would you like to be present at the *dénouement* to-night?"

"No!" roared the Colonel, opening the door at the same time. "I have no taste for witnessing a girl-hunt."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the Governor. "You ought to be one of the party. They say the young lady is a beauty. Think how magnificent she will be to-night! Unfortunately, her good looks won't last. Prison air is fatal to the complexion."

The Colonel went off without replying, and Ignatieff ringing his bell, sent an orderly to the officer of the guard, requesting him to warn the sentries that a messenger with despatches would leave the prison shortly



after midnight, and that the man was not on any account to be detained. He then despatched a note to the chief of the local police, making the necessary arrangements for the pursuit of Beritza and the capture of his sister.

CHAPTER XXV

The Escape

Just as the great prison clock struck the hour of twelve, Count Alexis Beritza, waiting in his cell, heard a stealthy step in the passage outside. In another moment the heavy bolt that guarded his door was slowly turned. No one appeared; and the young Count understood that the first step towards his release had been taken.

It was a moonlight night; but there were masses of cloud in the sky, and every now and then the moon, which he could just see from the narrow slit which made the cell window, sailed into one of the great banks of cloud, and was obscured. Already he had arranged his bed as he had been told by the gaoler. There was nothing for him to do but wait: and he dared not move till he was certain that the interval fixed by Sindorff had expired.

At length he felt sure that the half-hour had gone. He

started up, and at the last moment pulled a pair of socks over his shoes, to deaden the sound of his footsteps. Then he gently pulled open the massive door of his cell, and stepped into the corridor.

The stillness of the grave brooded over the prison. He had expected to hear the tread of a sentry; but no such sound fell on his ears. Some distance off a light burned. It was in the direction Sindorff had told him to take, and he walked towards it. A little beyond the lamp he came to the great stone staircase, and there he found the military overcoat, hanging where Sindorff had told him he should find it.

Taking it with him he went down the stairs; and before he reached the lowest flight he came upon the corridor which ended (as he had been told) in a glass door. Passing swiftly along the corridor he opened the door, went through, and closed it after him. He was now in a narrow passage, lighted by a window with iron bars. He ran up to it, and found, as he had expected, a small file tipped with a cork, lying on the window-sill. But looking at the bars he judged that there would be no need to use the file; and he was right. They were pretty wide apart, and rather slender. Mounting on the window sill, he opened the sash and placed his back against the wall which formed one side of the window, and putting his feet against one of the upright bars, pushed with all his might. The bar bent slightly, and he continued



to strain at it till he had forced it so far apart from the one next it, that there was nearly room enough between the two to permit of his squeezing himself through between them. He had only to repeat the operation with the other bar, crossing to the other side of the window, and treating it in the same way, and he found the gap quite large enough for his purpose.

The measured step of a sentry at some little distance was plainly audible. The Count waited till it died away, and then dropped the overcoat out on the asphalt beneath. This formed a soft bed, so that when, a moment later, he himself dropped from the window, he not only sustained no injury, but made no appreciable noise.

He turned to the left, and came to an iron gate. It was unlocked; he slipped through, and found himself in a small flower garden. The Governor's house was on his right; and a lofty iron railing separated the enclosure from the main approach to the prison.

The Count now put on the overcoat and the military cap which he found in one of its pockets. He was only a few yards from the wicket-gate in the railing, and as soon as he had passed through it he stooped, and drew off the socks which he had put on outside his shoes. Then he marched boldly down the wide approach which led to the guard-room.

A single sentry was pacing to and fro. Alexis made straight for him, and awaited the challenge.

"Who goes there?"

"A friend!"

"The countersign, friend?"

"Confound it! I have forgotten to ask for it! I must go back!" And stamping on the ground as if vexed at his own forgetfulness, he turned, and went back to the garden. This, he knew, was the critical moment. All would depend on the disposition of the sentry and the warder in charge of the gate. If they proved obstinate all would be in vain.

Stooping down for a moment in the garden, he scooped up a handful of earth, and rubbed it over the lower parts of the legs of his trousers, so as to deaden, if possible, the tell-tale colour. Then he boldly walked back to the sentry.

"See here, comrade," he said, "I am going to Moscow with despatches. I daren't delay my journey; and I daren't rouse any officer at the Governor's house to get the countersign. I ought to have asked for it before I left; but the truth is, I have had a glass of vodka in the kitchen, and now the Governor has gone to bed. I see no lights, at all events. Let me pass; there's a good fellow; and here is a rouble to drink success to my journey."

The man hesitated. It was no doubt against the rules to let any one pass him without giving the countersign; but he had been specially instructed that a soldier would go out carrying despatches; and he held out his hand for the rouble.

At the gate there was similar trouble with the warder, who demanded a written permit; but he, too, had been warned that a bearer of despatches would pass out, and that the soldier was on no account to be detained. So, after some grumbling, which was silenced by the offer of a rouble, he undid the locks and bolts, and the Count stepped into the silent street—free!

Not a suspicion crossed his mind that the authorities had smoothed the way for his escape—that he was like a captive bird let out of its cage with a string tied to its leg. He merely supposed that he had been for once unusually fortunate.

Now that he was in the street he did not know which way to turn, for he had only a vague idea of the direction in which lay the church with the chimes at which he hoped to meet his sister's agent. But judging that the danger of loitering in the neighbourhood of the prison was greater even than the danger of going in the wrong direction, he walked swiftly away through the silent streets. Two men, emerging from the shadow of the prison, followed unnoticed, fifty yards behind.

He met no one, and before long the welcome sound of chiming bells floated on the air of the summer night. He stopped short, turned to the left, that being the direction from which the sound of the chimes came, and began to run. The men who were following him were obliged to run also, least they should lose sight of him; and be-



fore long they were joined by three others in military uniform, who overtook them. Two of these were common soldiers, the third was Captain Ignatieff.

On reaching the square Count Beritza passed the church without seeing any one but a beggar huddled up in a corner. It was obviously dangerous to walk about dressed as he was, for the moon was now flooding the open space with light. Beritza therefore went back to the church, that he might hide in its shadow, till the man he hoped to meet should come. On his way he passed the beggar a second time, and noticed that he was sitting up and observing him. The Count thought it best to walk on, when, to his surprise, the tramp rose and stood before him, keenly inspecting him. Not daring to to resent the scrutiny Count Alexis was passing by, when the beggar said in a low tone,—

"Do you think, sir, it will rain to-morrow?"

The young Count started. These were the words which he should have addressed to the agent he was expecting; but he never expected that his deliverer would appear as a street beggar. He was hesitating whether he should give the second half of the password, when the beggar drew nearer, and looking closely into his face said—"It does not look like it, but I have seen snow in June before now."

Alexis suddenly gripped the beggar's arm.

"My sister!" he gasped. "Where is she?"

"This way, sir. She is close by. All is ready—horses saddled, and everything prepared. See the faint light yonder? That is her window."

As he said this Goloffski was hurrying the escaped prisoner across the square. His pursuers were close at hand, waiting at the end of the street down which they had come. They were hiding in the shadow till the fugitive and his companion should leave the square, for they did not wish to come out into the open in the moonlight. But as soon as they saw that the Count and his companion were making for one of the houses, they darted forward, making no further effort at concealment.

The young Count stood still on the doorstep when he heard the tramp of the running feet, and the first glance he threw behind him told him that his pursuers were close upon him.

"Fly, Count, fly, or they will seize your sister!" cried Goloffski, in a loud whisper.

But the warning came too late. Before Alexis had run half a dozen steps the foremost of the gendarmes had his hand upon his shoulder. The young Count shook off the man's hold and sprang forward. But a loud mocking laugh rang in his ears, and a voice he knew well called out,—"You may as well surrender, young man, else we shall be obliged to shoot you down like a dog. Seize him, two of you, and hold him fast. You, Danskia and Birloff, follow me!"

He turned, as he spoke, towards the house in which Ursula was waiting.

Alexis turned, too, and understood. In one moment, by a flash of intuitive knowledge, he saw that he had been the victim of a plot, that the whole escape had been pre-arranged, and that the capture of his sister was the aim of the police authorities.

"Ah, Ignatieff, you black-hearted coward!" cried the young Count, as he struggled madly with the two men who held him. "May the Almighty curse you—tyrant, fiend that you are. Oh, for one hour with you, Ignatieff, face to face with swords in our hands! To think that we are placed under the heel of such a man as this! My sister——"

But there his words stopped.

The beggar man, whom no one had noticed as he stood under the wall of the house, had started at the name "Ignatieff," and clutched at something in his breast. As he listened to the Count's passionate words his doubts vanished. This was that Captain Ignatieff who had used his wife so cruelly, the man for whose blood he had thirsted as the wounded soldier thirsts for water, the man he had come so far to kill. No tremor spoiled the Russian's aim. In one second—in less, far less than a second of time—the revolver was pulled out, and with a savage—"Die, dog, in your sins!" Goloffski fired point blank at the officer's heart.



The doomed man fell, with hardly a groan; and after the first pause of horrified surprise the soldiers with one accord ran up to the fallen man.

Goloffski turned and ran, all the soldiers except one, who was supporting the Captain's head, plunging after him. The fugitive stopped and faced them, his revolver in his hand. Then with a sudden movement he threw the weapon away, as much as to say—"I have no quarrel with you!" and continued his flight. The soldiers, who had stopped short when the revolver was levelled at them, now ran on. But one of them, more cold-blooded than the others, thinking that the assassin was in a fair way of escaping, got his rifle ready as he ran. Then suddenly stopping he dropped on one knee, threw up his rifle, and took deliberate aim. The nex instant a loud report rang out. Goloffski, poor faithful creature, threw up his arms and fell on his face, dead—one more victim of Russian misgovernment.

"It is better so—prevents our being punished or permitting an escape, anyhow," said the man who had fired the shot, when he had walked up to his companions.

"You are right," said they. "It is much better."

"Better for him, too," muttered one of them under his breath.

The shots had attracted the gendarmes, who came running from all directions. One of the soldiers remained by the dead body of Goloffski, while another went to the

prison to report what had happened. The third man returned to the spot where the Captain's body was lying, and found his companion supporting the dead man's head as if he had been alive.

The Count had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVI

URSULA WELCOMES A PRISONER

After parting from Ursula, Stanford went back to his hotel, and after a time went to bed. But he found it impossible to sleep. His mind was full of Ursula, her courage, her devotion, and the peril in which she stood. Not for a moment did he suspect that the police authorities, acting in concert with Ignatieff, had permitted Count Beritza to write to his sister, and flattered him into the idea that he was about to make his escape, in order to enable them to arrest Ursula herself. Beyond the fact that the letter from the prison had reached her in some mysterious and unexplained way, he knew of no fact upon which he could have founded any suspicion of that sort. But none the less he felt uneasy on her account. Her brother was about to make his escape and take refuge in her house. What more likely, he thought, than that the fugitive should be tracked and apprehended? And if so,

would not his sister suffer for offering him a shelter? The thought that he was lying there, snug and comfortable, while at that very moment the liberty, perhaps the life, of the girl he loved might be in danger, was intolerable.

He sprang out of bed, dressed himself in the dark, and slipped out of the hotel by a side entrance. His purpose was to visit the house in the square, and see that all was safe. And then, as it only wanted an hour or two of daylight, he thought he might keep a look out in the neighbourhood of the prison till daybreak.

He was still some little distance from the square—approaching it by a back street—when he heard a shot fired, and then, a few moments later, came another report, much louder than the first. Without stopping to think, the Englishman darted off in the direction of the firing. He could hear the noise of men running and shouting in various quarters. Here and there a window was thrown up, and some one called out to ask him the cause of the disturbance. Without stopping to answer he ran on.

Suddenly, in turning a corner, he dashed against a man running in the opposite direction, with such force that he was nearly thrown to the ground.

"Confound you! Can't you look where you're going?" roared Stanford.

The stranger, who was staggering from the force of the collision, said something in Russian, which Stanford did



not comprehend. Then, as the young surgeon was about to run on, the stranger called out in English,—

"Can you, sir, tell me the nearest way to the open country?"

"The open country!" repeated Stanford. "Really, I don't know. What part of the country do you mean?"

"Any part—anywhere out of the town!"

This made Stanford look at the man more narrowly. He saw a tall, slight, boyish figure, dressed in a military overcoat much too large for him—a pale, distressed countenance, and close-cropped hair under the peaked cap. In a moment the truth flashed upon him.

"Are you Alexis Beritza?" he blurted out.

"Hush!" cried the fugitive, throwing a scared glance around him. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"I am a friend of your sister. She told me she expected you to make your escape——But let us walk on. We dare not stand still."

The street was a narrow one, and perfectly quiet; and the two men passed through it rapidly, though without running.

"It is better not to run," said Stanford hurriedly. "Running is sure to attract attention."

"But I have this moment escaped. The soldiers are close behind me."

"No matter. Once out of their sight, it is safer not to



run.—Isn't that some one coming? Stay here till he has gone by."

He drew his companion into the shelter of a narrow passage, till the gendarme who was hurrying from the opposite direction had gone by. Then they went on.

"Was it you fired the shots I heard?" asked the Englishman.

"No; I had no weapon. My companion—my sister's agent, a man I did not know—shot down the leader of the party who were about to arrest me. In the confusion we ran off in different directions. But I heard the report of a rifle; and I fear he has been either killed or taken."

"Then you have not seen Ur—your sister?"

"No," answered Alexis; and he went on to tell his new friend in a hurried whisper his conviction that a trap had been laid for his sister with himself for bait. "Where are you taking me?" he asked, in conclusion.

"To the house of a friend of your cause," said Stanford. "Shelter and a change of clothes you must have. To try to escape to the open country in that dress would be madness.

"It was better than yielding oneself a prisoner," said Alexis simply.

This conversation was carried on in whispers; but there was no one to overhear them. With a little caution they managed to elude the few gendarmes

who were in the streets; and in less than half an hour they reached the river side. Stanford was making for the house where Lobieski was concealed, hoping that his friends would succour the escaped prisoner.

After some trouble the doctor succeeded in making himself heard by the people of the house without making too much noise; and to his great relief they consented to shelter Count Beritza, at all events for the night.

No sooner had he seen Ursula's brother received under that hospitable roof, than he turned and ran back to the square. He had no reason to suppose, from what Alexis had told him, that Ursula herself was in any special danger; but he wanted to satisfy himself that she was safe. It was only the urgent necessity of guiding Alexis to a place of safety that had prevented him from going to her at once. In his hurry Stanford missed a turning, and went rather too far in one direction. There was nothing for it but to go back, not exactly retracing his steps, but taking a cross cut which would, he thought, bring him into the square nearly opposite Ursula's house.

He was not now running, but walking as fast as he could; and as he went by he noticed a small black object lying in the roadway. He picked it up, and to his delight found that it was a revolver, loaded in five out of the six chambers. Guessing, correctly enough, from the clumsy look of the weapon, that it was the



pistol with which Goloffski had shot Captain Ignatieff, he thrust it into his pocket.

In another minute he came in sight of Ursula's house. All was quiet in the square—only in the sitting-room upstairs a bright light was burning, noticeable enough, in spite of the dim radiance of the dawn. Stanford hardly knew what to make of this. He hesitated to knock at the door, lest he should cause Ursula unnecessary alarm; but he could not think of going back to his hotel without telling her that her brother had found a shelter.

He was crossing the square, intending to knock gently at the door, when he saw a man's shadow cross the blind in Ursula's sitting-room. He stood still, as if turned to stone. What could this mean, except that Ursula was under arrest? Perhaps she had been already conveyed to prison! For one instant horror seemed to master all his faculties. If it had been to save his life, or Ursula's, he could not have moved from the spot where he stood. But this paralysis lasted but a moment. It passed away as suddenly as it had come, leaving him alert, and collected in all his senses. Again the shadow passed across the blind, and this time he could make out that the figure was that of a man in uniform.

Without hesitating a moment the young doctor went up to the door and tried it. It was not locked. He went in, and shut the door behind him. There was no



light in the lower part of the house; but the dawn was beginning to steal through a large pane of glass above the street door. He could distinguish the staircase, the door of the sitting-room on the right, and another door under the stairs which, he supposed, led to a cellar.

The first point was to ascertain whether Ursula was in the house or not; and after listening for a few moments on the stairs he heard her voice. What she said he did not understand, for she was speaking, of course, in Russian; but he could have sworn to her voice among a thousand others. The deep, gruff tones of a man answered her.

The situation was plain enough. Ursula was under arrest, and she would be detained in custody until a conveyance could be got to take her to prison. Meanwhile, her luggage was probably being searched for compromising documents.

Standing there at the foot of the stairs, Stanford realised that this girl, who was dearer to him than life, was about to be shut up, probably for life, within prison walls. Like most Englishmen, Stanford had a strong respect for law; and under ordinary circumstances he would have shrunk from making any attempt to interfere with the course of justice. But he knew that in Russia a prisoner is no more sure of having a fair trial—or any trial at all—than he would be among the lawless Arabs of the Soudan. He had read of young girls, mere



children some of them, who had been accused of carrying letters to suspected persons, and on this charge carried off from their parents, who never saw or heard of them again. He knew that it was better for a man, and a thousand times better for a woman, to fall into the hands of savages, than to be immured in a Russian prison.

Such, at least, was Stanford's belief. And at that moment the wild thought came into his head—Was it impossible for him to rescue Ursula from the hands of these men? There could not be more than two or three gendarmes upstairs. If he could managed to separate them, surely the thing might be managed. Time pressed; for at any moment the conveyance, which no doubt had been sent for, might arrive; and with it more gendarmes.

No thought of personal danger to himself crossed the young doctor's mind. He did not stop to reflect that if he failed in the attempt he would certainly be apprehended and condemned to a long term of imprisonment, while, if he had the misfortune to kill a man in the struggle, his own life must pay the penalty. His one fixed idea was that Ursula was there, within a few yards of him, a prisoner, and that it rested with him alone to set her free.

In a few seconds he had thought of a rough plan of action.

He went to the door under the staircase and opened it.



He could just see a steep flight of steps, leading, no doubt, to a cellar underneath the house. Leaving the door of the cellar wide open, he went into the sitting-room close by, caught up a bronze ornament that stood on a side-table, and fell to hammering at the panels of the door with all his might, making noise enough to wake the dead.



CHAPTER XXVII

One Against Three

This intolerable din produced the natural and expected result. A door upstairs was flung open, and after a torrent of Russian gutturals, (which produced no effect whatever), the lumbering tread of a man in heavy military boots was heard on the wooden stairs. Stanford, standing with his back to the staircase and his right hand to the street door, right opposite the open door leading to the cellar, continued to hammer with all his might upon the panels of the door of the sitting-room, quite insensible, apparently, to the fact that an angry gendarme was rushing down the stairs and making straight for him.

The man was within a yard of him when Stanford dropped the bronze Venus with which he was striking the door, seized the gendarme by the collar with his right hand and by the belt with his left, and with one powerful heave hurled him right down the cellar steps. In another



instant the cellar door was shut and locked. One of the enemy, he thought to himself, was as good as dead.

Very soon, however, the imprisoned gendarme began to give evidence that he was for some purposes very much alive. He began shouting at the top of his voice for his comrade to come and release him, accompanying his shouts with kicks on the locked door so vigorous that it seemed as if they must necessarily smash it to atoms. Stanford went into the little sitting-room and drew back, so as to keep out of sight of any one in the passage, without closing the door of the room.

Before a minute had elapsed the tread of a second gendarme was heard upon the stairs. Lower and lower the man descended, calling out to his comrade all the while. Stanford took poor Goloffski's revolver out of his pocket, and grasped it by the barrel. Hidden in the obscurity of the parlour he could easily see what went on in the passage. The gendarme reached the bottom of the stairs, and hearing his comrade's voice close to him at the other side of the locked door, swung round and bent down with the intention of turning the key and freeing his companion.

But before his hand could touch the key, as his arm was in the act of being stretched out towards it, Stanford struck him on the head with the handle of his revolver, and he dropped where he stood, stunned and helpless.

Stanford did not waste a second look at him, but

sprang upstairs. The door of Ursula's sitting-room stood open. He rushed in. Ursula was sitting on a sofa, dressed as if to leave the house, her clasped hands resting on her lap. At a little distance a gendarme, who was evidently of superior rank, was kneeling beside an open trunk, engaged in turning over the contents of a portfolio. Both started to their feet on seeing Stanford.

It was no time for hesitation or half measures.

Without giving the gendarme time to recover from his surprise, the Englishman sprang upon him, and held the muzzle of the revolver level with his eyes.

"Tell him that if he moves or speaks he is a dead man!" shouted Stanford; and Ursula repeated the words in Russian. The man stood perfectly still, stupefied, apparently as much by astonishment as by fear.

"Take that strap from the trunk and pass it round his legs!" was Stanford's next order.

The girl instantly obeyed him; but the touch of the leather as she passed it round his limbs seemed to make the man realise that he was to be rendered helpless. Suddenly dashing the pistol aside, he sprang upon his antagonist.

Stanford had never meant to fire; and if this movement had been executed a few seconds sooner, it might have succeeded. But it came too late. Ursula did not lose her head for a moment. Her nimble fingers passed the end of the strap through the buckle; and even as the



gendarme was holding the revolver aside with one hand and grasping Stanford's collar with the other, she pulled the strap tight, and then giving it a sudden jerk, threw the officer off his balance. He fell heavily to the floor, and from that moment he was helpless. It was an easy matter for Stanford to secure his arms, and Ursula passed a second trunk-strap round his body, thus pinioning his arms to his sides.

"It's of no use gagging him," said Stanford in a rapid whisper, "for I can't help that fellow in the cellar making a row. More gendarmes may arrive at any moment. We must be off!—Have you any money? I have none."

Ursula ran to a side table, where her most valuable possessions lay already sealed up. She tore off the wrapper, and seized her porte-monnaie and the few articles of jewellery which lay beside it.

"Wait one moment!" she cried.

"We can't—we daren't!"

"Yes—just a moment."

Before Stanford could detain her, she had rushed out of the room and a moment later he heard her bolting the house doors, front and back.

"Now come," she said calmly, when she reappeared.

Throwing a last glance at the prostrate gendarme, Stanford followed her into a small room behind the one in which the struggle had taken place. The window of



this room overlooked the courtyard; and by the time Stanford entered the room Ursula had thrown open the window, and was in the act of clambering up to the window-sill. In an instant the doctor comprehended her object. In the stable beneath were the two horses which, she had told him, were always kept ready saddled at night, in readiness for her brother to make his escape from the town. By locking the doors of the house and leaving by the window, several minutes would be saved, if only they could get clear of the immediate neighbourhood; for it would take some time for the police to break into the house and discover what had happened, even after they knew that something was wrong.

"Let me go first!" cried Stanford. Ursula stood on one side, and in a second or two he had let himself down from the window sill, and dropped into the yard. Ursula immediately followed his example, and her lover, standing beneath the window, was able to break her fall, so that she reached the ground easily enough.

By great good luck the officers who first arrested Ursula had gone to the prison with the body of the Governor, and had not had time to search the premises thoroughly. The horses were still in the stable. In a very few moments Stanford had led them out, and Ursula and he were mounted, and leaving the stable yard.



The cries of the pinioned gendarme and the furious blows of his companion below stairs sounded frightfully loud, even in the open air. There could be no doubt, they both saw, that the attention of the police must very soon be called to the house. Their one hope lay in being able to get out of the town unobserved. And yet they did not dare to ride fast, lest the noise of the galloping hoofs should be heard by the patrols, and lead to their being stopped. It was hard, indeed, to know whether there was more danger in dashing on, or in delaying in order to go more quietly; but the daylight was growing stronger every moment, and at last Stanford's anxiety and impatience to get on overcame his caution.

"We are so near the green fields by this time," he said to his companion, "don't you think we might push on now?"

For answer Ursula touched her horse with the whip and the animal bounded forward. Stanford followed at her horse's heels, and the clatter made by the four pairs of hoofs on the rough pavement of the streets, which at that hour were absolutely empty, seemed a challenge loud enough to be heard by the whole Russian force in the town.

Very soon they heard voices in the rear calling on them to halt. Without stopping to answer, or even looking behind them, they pressed on. Once a bullet

whizzed by them, but it did no damage; and the man who fired it probably thought that he had been over hasty, for he did not attempt to pursue them.

In a few minutes they were outside the town. Happily they had left it on the western side, so that a slight change in their course brought them in a straight line for Austrian territory, where they would be comparatively safe. Hardly a syllable did they speak, except when in a few hurried words Stanford told Ursula that he had met her brother, and that he had left him in the house that had so long sheltered Lobieski. She knew that if there was any man on earth who could be trusted to get Alexis out of the country that man was Lobieski.

Faster and faster they rode on, never daring to draw rein till they had put at least thirty miles between them and the town of Birtova. Then they stopped at a way-side inn for an hour to rest their horses and procure some food. This was certain to increase their peril, for, of course the people at the inn would be questioned by the police; but it could not be helped. They mounted and rode on again, sparing their horses as much as possible.

Early in the afternoon Stanford thought that they must be drawing near the boundary line between Russia and Galicia; and he was well aware of the fact that every mile they travelled increased rather than diminished their danger. The police authorities in the frontier

towns must have been informed of their escape from Birtova; the boundary would be well guarded, every by-way would be watched, every sentry and gendarme would be on the alert. More than once the two fugitives had spoken of this, but they had been unable to see any way out of the difficulty.

At length, coming to the top of a small rising ground, they simultaneously checked their horses and looked at each other. Each felt that they dared not ride on any further. Right in front of them was a town large enough to be a small market town. If they rode into it they would certainly be stopped and questioned.

At the foot of the rising ground was a thick forest, which stretched some distance to the right and left.

"What if this be a frontier town?" asked Stanford.

"That is just what I was thinking," answered the girl. "I must go forward alone and make inquiries."

"No," cried Stanford. "We must not part."

"Do you not see," said Ursula, gently, "that the danger is tenfold greater when we are together? The gendarmes will be on the look-out for two, not for one."

"Then I will go," said Stanford, throwing himself from his horse.

"Not so," said Ursula, smiling. "You forget that you know only a few words of the language. You would be asked for your passport——"

"I have it here."

"And immediately identified as the Englishman who had carried off a prisoner from the hands of the police. Of course the landlord of your hotel has been questioned by the police, and has told them that you left the hotel at night and never returned. Besides, it would be simply impossible for you even to understand what people said in answer to your questions."

This was true; there was no getting over it.

"Come," said Ursula, "we must first find out where we are, and get some information about the surrounding country. Let us ride down to the foot of the hill; then you can hide the horses in the wood and wait with them while I go into the town on foot. Oh, trust me," she went on, as Stanford shook his head. "I know exactly whom to apply to and what to say. I will be very careful. The danger is really not so great as it looks."

They rode slowly forward, Stanford all the time trying to think of some plan that would not expose the girl he loved to so much danger. But this it was impossible to do. His ignorance of the language made it necessary that she should act, and it was obviously safer for her to proceed on foot and unaccompanied.

Ursula's plan was carried out. The horses were tethered in a thicket, and very reluctantly Stanford gave Ursula his promise that he would stay by them, and make no attempt to seek her in the town, until after sunset.

"I must have some hours to work in," she said, as

half unconsciously she gave him her hand at parting. "If I am not back before the sun sets you will ride off in another direction, for——"

"No; that I will not do," said Stanford. "I will not leave Russia till you leave it with me."

"My friend," said the girl, smiling sadly as she spoke, "do you think that if imprisonment awaits me, it would be any consolation to know that you were in prison too, or hourly expecting arrest? But we will not speak of that. I do not mean to let them take me. Good-bye!"

She turned and walked rapidly towards the town, while Stanford stood and watched her as long as her figure was in sight.

Never, to the end of his life, could the memory of the next few hours be blotted out from the young doctor's memory. The anxiety was well nigh intolerable. Weeks after, he waked sometimes in the middle of the night, oppressed as by a nightmare with the vague idea that some terrible disaster which he could do nothing to avert was about to fall on him. The hours seemed as if they would never pass by. Time after time he left the tethered animals and went to the high-road, but no Ursula was in sight. He was in a fever of apprehension, unable to rest for a moment. He longed for, yet dreaded, the setting of the sun; for if Ursula did not appear by that hour, there could be little hope that she had

escaped the clutches of the police. And then, what was he to do? How was it possible that he, alone and penniless among people speaking an alien tongue, could do anything to succour or help her?

At length the level rays of the sun, when seen in the open, and the gathering twilight in the wood, warned Stanford that the hour was at hand. Once more he left the horses and went to the high road, resolved that if Ursula was not in sight he would set off at once for the town, and try to learn what had become of her.

Before he reached the road the clatter of hoofs was audible; and a few moments later a squadron of mounted soldiers galloped by. Stanford followed them with his eyes, and saw them stop a market-cart, which, laden with vegetables, was being slowly driven from the direction of the town. After some parley the horsemen wheeled round, and came back a few yards, then turned into a lane leading due south and speedily disappeared. The cart with the vegetables came slowly on. An old woman was driving it. Stanford watched it without interest. When it came alongside a gentle voice said,—

"Mr. Stanford!"

The Englishman started as if a pistol had been fired at his ear. He gazed at the woman in the cart as if he could no longer credit his senses.

Yes, it was she! A brown stain hid her fair skin; an old shawl thrown over her head, which just allowed



some coarse grey hair to be visible, concealed her hair The disguise was perfect in its way.

"Here!" she cried, tossing a bundle out of the cart. "Put these clothes on, and make yourself as like a Russian peasant farmer as you can. Tie up your chin with that red handkerchief, and pretend you have toothache. That will account for my doing all the talking. And make haste, please. I have sold our horses to a Jew for about a quarter of their value; but he will keep our secret. Then I got this cart and pony. The Jew will be here immediately for the horses; so, pray make haste."

"One moment," said Stanford—"those soldiers I saw you speaking to—?"

"Oh, they suspected nothing," said Ursula. "They described you and your humble servant. I said I had heard of such persons in the town, and persuaded them to go down that lane. We have only to keep in the opposite direction."

By the time Stanford had changed his clothes the Jew arrived, and the horses were handed over to him. The runaways drove on steadily the whole night, and morning found them close to the frontier, at a lonely spot which Ursula had noted on a map while she was in the town. Early in the morning they crossed the boundary without difficulty, in the character of a farmer's widow and her son taking vegetables to market. They travelled

in this way for some days, till they reached a town in Transylvania from which they made their way to Pesth. There they stopped till the money for which Stanford had written to England arrived. Four days after that they landed at Dover.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A Woman's Heart

Courtship is generally held to be the happiest period of a man's life. The same may hold true of a woman. That is as it may be. Frank Bickersteth, however, did not find the adage true in his experience. He was passionately in love with Natalie von Schöffer, but he could not succeed in persuading himself that she felt for him anything approaching the tenderness he had for her. She had promised to marry him; she assured him that she meant to keep her promise—and no one acquainted with the Baroness's past and with the present state of her exchequer could entertain much doubt on that point. When he begged for some proof of affection (which was not seldom), she would laugh and rub his hair the wrong way and tell him not to be stupid if she was in a good humour, or shrug her pretty shoulders with a frank expression of "How can you be such a bore?" if she

happened to be in a bad one. All this was hardly satisfactory; yet Frank told himself a dozen times a day that he would rather a thousand times have the beautiful Natalie, with all her whims and "difficult places," than any other woman, if she were invariably as sweet as new milk. He was infatuated, partly by her beauty, partly by her total unlikeness to the ordinary type of Englishwoman.

The quarrel between Frank and his uncle had been made up, after a fashion; and this was mainly Maud's doing. She had put it to her father that, after all, Frank was his own master, and that it was too cruel a punishment for asserting his independence that he should be thrown upon the world without any resources. Mr. Bickersteth's own pride also told him that if he cast off Frank altogether, it would seem as if he were incensed against him for not marrying Maud. Besides, he loved the boy. The quarrel was therefore made up, so far as a quarrel can be when the cause of it is not removed; and Frank was given to understand that at all events his allowance would continue to be paid as usual.

One afternoon, about a fortnight after the escape of Ursula and her lover from Birtova, Frank set out to call on Madame von Schöffer, for the purpose of carrying her a beautiful diamond brooch, which he had had specially made for her.

He found her in a mood which was not uncommon with her—languid and apathetic. Her eyes were red, as

though she had been crying; but when Frank begged to know what had been troubling her, she would not admit that anything ailed her.

"I have bought you a little present, Natalie," he said, after a pause, and put the case into her hands.

She opened it, and her face flushed when the sparkle of the brilliants caught her eye. Then she placed the open case on a small table at her side, and gazed at the gems for some moments. Frank wondered that she did not offer him a word of thanks.

With a long-drawn breath that ended in a sigh, she gently closed the case, and handed it to her lover in silence.

"What do you mean, Natalie?" asked Frank, his heart beating painfully as he spoke.

"It means that I give you up."

She spoke with her eyes on the floor, rather sadly, but quite firmly.

"Natalie!" cried Frank, his face growing pale, "Natalie, you cannot be so cruel. What have I done to deserve this?"

"What have you done?" she repeated. "Nothing! You have been the kindest of lovers, the most generous of men. You have taken me on trust, and have trusted me so implicitly—"

"And I will go on doing so!" cried Frank, but she went on without heeding him.

"You have trusted me so fully that I cannot marry you. Don't ask me to explain. I cannot. If you had been like some men—like all the other men I ever knew—it would have been different. But I cannot make you happy. I cannot love you."

"I am willing to wait for that," said Frank. "By and by——"

"No!" interrupted the Baroness, with rising colour. "Do not deceive yourself. I have never pretended to love you—is not that true?"

Frank could only bend his head in silence.

"And now I tell you that I shall never love you. It is not in your nature, nor in the nature of any Englishman, to win the love of a woman like me. You deceive yourself when you fancy you can. I am honest enough to tell you the truth."

For some seconds Frank did not speak.

"I cannot let you go like this, Natalie," he said at last. "I have loved you, and love you still, too well. If you have a heart—and I believe you have—I will win it."

Natalie's mood changed again. Her lover's obstinate persistence, which would have touched some women and charmed others, only irritated her.

"Fool!" she said to herself, "I am half-disposed to take him at his word." But her better nature triumphed. "Since I have made up my mind," was her next thought, "why should I hesitate?"

"What can I say to you?" she said aloud, "to make you understand? Do you suppose that if we were married you would be happy? I tell you, you would be miserable!"

"There is only one thing that need prevent our happiness," said Frank, gravely.

"Only one thing?"

"If you should love another."

A vivid blush covered the Baroness's face.

"Is it true, Natalie?" he asked, very quietly.

"If you will have it—it is true."

The Englishman rose to his feet.

"Thank you for telling me the truth"—"at last," he was tempted to add, but did not. Without trusting himself to look at the face he loved so well, he held out his hand. She took it for a moment in her own, and placed in it the case containing the splendid jewel he had given her.

"Won't you keep it he said," "as a 'souvenir'—a remembrance of one who—who will always——"

He stopped, unable to go on. Unconsciously he had raised his eyes; and even at that last moment the sight of her face, and the warm touch of her fingers as she held the little box in his hand, thrilled him from head to foot, and made him feel as if he would rather die where he stood than bid her good-bye for ever.

"You will keep it? You will not refuse to take it?" he said, gently; and she yielded.

No word more was spoken. She withdrew her hand from his, and turned away her head. When she looked round again the room was empty.

For nearly an hour Natalie sat where Frank had left her, revolving many things. In imagination, she had pictured herself Frank's wife—in spite of what had just taken place!—and had half-regretted her generous action. She had also had time to think of the future—of what would become of her when her purse (light enough already) should be quite empty. Her chief consolation was that she knew that as Frank's wife she would have been miserable. His ways, his temperament, his turns of expression, the very tones of his voice were distasteful, sometimes even abhorrent to her. Come what might, she thought, nothing could be worse than a marriage in which aversion took the place of love.

This thought was passing through the Baroness's mind when Count Borovitchi was announced.

A tender blush, such as Frank Bickersteth had never seen on her face, rose to her face, as she gave the Count her hand. He sat down, and began to tap the side of his boot idly with his cane.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to regard this as a P.P.C. visit my dear Baroness," said he.

Natalie started, and looked at him wonderingly.

"May I ask where you are going?"

"Going back to Poland."

Something in the Count's look or tone convinced the Baroness that this was not true.

"I have too few friends to lose two of them in one day," she said, bitterly.

"What do you mean? What friend have you lost to-day?"

She made no answer.

"You don't mean Frank Bickersteth? You never could be so mad!"

"I told him that I loved another, and he then did the first sensible thing he has done since I knew him—left me of his own accord."

"The rupture is final, then?"

"Absolutely final."

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

"I could not marry him, Pietro, while I loved thee."

This was said in a whisper so low that the Count was barely able to hear it.

"Natalie!" he said sharply, "you forget that that chapter was closed more than a year ago. It cannot be re-opened now." He paused a moment. "Besides, it is as well that you should know—in three weeks I am to be married."

"Married! You——"

"My dear Natalie, you forget that although you are adorable, you have no money, and—what is even still more important—I have none either. We agreed that

to marry each other was impossible. But that need not prevent either you or me from making a match with some one better provided."

"She has money, then, this English miss?"

"Certainly. How else could I marry her?"

"Ah, but you are mercenary! See here, my friend. I have given up my wealthy lover because my heart was yours. Will you be less brave than a woman? I do not say, let us marry; but if your heart is as it once was, I would say, let us wait. Let us not put an insuperable obstacle in the way of our union. Who knows? Those estates in Poland may become yours. Our case is not hopeless."

"Natalie, you are intolerable! You have no sense!" cried Borovitchi, springing from his chair.

"Oh, how you have changed!"

"I must go now. I have an engagement."

"What sort of engagement?"

"A very important engagement."

"Not one of those Nihilist meetings, is it?"

The Count frowned.

"No," he said, shortly.

"It is not to meet that Colonel—Colonel Brinski?"

"No, no, no! I tell you he is not even in England just now."

"Oh, then it is a meeting of the Nihilists! I see it in your face. Pietro, my beloved, do not go. I trem-

ble every time I hear of your going to those assemblies knowing what I know. Your life is not safe among them. Indeed it is not! Stay here to-night, and dine with me. You say you are going away. Do not deny me this last favour! It may be the last I shall ever ask you. Stay with me this evening, and give up your engagement with those dreadful revolutionaries. I have a presentiment——"

"Natalie!" interrupted the Count, roughly, "I think you are a greater fool than ever you were, and that is saying a good deal. Why should I give up an important appointment because you have taken a fancy that you want me to dine with you? The thing is absurd."

"It is for your own sake, Count—if I must not call you by any other name. It is for your own sake. Do not go to their meetings."

"This is the last I shall ever attend," said the Count, impressively. "I don't mind telling you that. From this night I bid good-bye to my friends the Anarchists—for they are little better."

"Ah, then, why go to-night? Please me for this once! By the memory of our love, do not go—do not go!"

She clung to his arm, and even tried to embrace him; but the Count, thoroughly angry, threw her roughly from him and turned away with an oath. She fell upon a chair, stumbled, and nearly came to the ground.

"Hear me only for a moment!" she cried. But the door slammed loudly, and in a few seconds more the noise of the street door being shut echoed through the house.

Natalie crept to the window, and watched the figure of the man she loved, as he walked rapidly away.

"Ah!" she said to herself, as the bitter tears sprang to her eyes, "now at last I am alone—alone!"

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The gay world knew Natalie von Schöffer no more. Three months later she was received as a novice at one of the houses of Our Lady of Mercy in Brussels.

CHAPTER XXIX

Denounced

Count Borovitchi did not feel exactly comfortable in his mind when Madame von Schöffer's door closed behind him. The worst man has something of a conscience; and Borovitchi's was at least sufficiently alive to make him uncomfortable. He knew that he ought to have married Natalie, for more reasons than one; and that it was to him she had a right to look for protection and support. He had thought to provide for her by marrying her to Frank Bickersteth; and he was angry at her for her folly in losing so desirable a prize. This grievance was of the greatest use to him in silencing the uncomfortable mutterings of his conscience. If Natalie chose to break with Frank Bickersteth, he said to himself, she had herself to thank for anything that might happen. If she fell into poverty—that was her affair. He washed his hands of her.

Presently his thoughts turned to a much pleasanter subject. It only wanted three weeks to his wedding day. Mr. Bickersteth had lately chosen to believe that his health was in a very precarious state; and he was anxious to see his daughter married and the alterations he contemplated making carried out without delay. He had therefore backed Borovitchi's entreaties for an early marriage, and Maud had been pressed into consenting.

Once the son-in-law of a wealthy English banker, (an old man, too, without much power of resistance), Borovitchi told himself he would be beyond the range of the arrows of adverse fortune. He would have done with plots and treacheries. As for Count Beritza and his sister, he reckoned them both as already outside the sphere of things interesting. They were disposed of. Colonel Brinski had not returned to England; and Borovitchi, though he had heard, like the rest of the world, of the assassination of Captain Ignatieff, had not learned whether Ursula had actually been apprehended or not.

Now that his matrimonial schemes were turning out so well, Ursula's fate had become a matter of secondary importance. She, like her brother, was only important to him as standing between him and the succession to the Beritza estates; and he felt sure that, since Ursula had become a Nihilist, he would be able, sooner or later, to obtain a grant of the estates from the Czar.

The Count had also determined to drop his connection

with the Nihilists. He would make no effort to withdraw from the society, but he would resign his leadership, and make fairly large donations every year to their funds. This would, no doubt, be held to atone for his lack of zeal. He had been quite sincere when he told the Baroness that he would meet the revolutionaries that night for the last time.

His reason for attending the meeting was twofold. He wanted, in the first place, to make some provision for carrying on the ordinary routine work of the society. He must find a successor. And in the second place, he wished to get a few minutes' private conversation with the secretary. Dimitrieff feared the Count, and had avoided him ever since the night when he had taken the Count's money. But Borovitchi had more work for the secretary, who had already proved so pliable. He found it to be absolutely necessary that he should have, not only the credit of possessing a large sum of money, but the power of disposing of a part of it, at least for a time. He required, therefore, Dimitrieff's signature to a document which would authorise him to dispose of some of the securities in which the funds of the society were invested.

Dimitrieff was sure to attend this meeting of the Society, and the Count intended to have a talk with him before the other members arrived, or after they had gone.

It still wanted some hours to the time of meeting, which had been fixed for eight o'clock. The Count objected to

this arrangement, because it interfered with his dinner hour; but as it suited every other member, he had felt compelled to acquiesce in it. There was nothing for it but to dine at half-past six; and the Count proceeded to his favourite restaurant and ate a well selected and excellent meal, despite the unfashionable hour.

On leaving the restaurant Borovitchi drove to the street in Soho in which the house rented by the Nihilists was situated. Dimitrieff was there, and the Count seized the opportunity of speaking to him in private.

"You remember," said he, "a letter you were good enough to write for me for me some little time ago?"

The secretary nodded.

"It was perfectly successful. I have gained an important social advantage—I don't mind telling you—from its being supposed that I am a wealthy man. But, my dear Dimitrieff, you know wealth, even suppositious wealth like mine, entails its responsibilities. In other words, I find I must make some use of this money—show myself the owner in some way, otherwise I shall lay myself open to suspicion. Now, I have an opportunity, a very rare one I may tell you, for investing a few thousand pounds, not in securities yielding a paltry three per cent., nor in shaky companies, but in the capital—the capital, mark you—of an old-established banking firm. The profits will be, I imagine, something between fifteen and twenty per cent., with practically first-class security.



Only, you understand, there is the difficulty that I must make the investment in my own name. And what I propose is this—you sign this power of attorney, (I think they call it) which gives me the neccssary power. You see our co-trustees have already signed it. I did not need to go into all these explanations with them; but in your case, of course, it is different. I merely told them that I had an opportunity of making some profit by changing the securities. I have only made the document apply to about half the funds—nine thousand pounds. The increase of interest will be fifteen per cent., but say twelve—seven hundred a year. I propose to share this. You take one third, I another, and the remaining third of their surplus income will belong to the society. If anyone should complain of the irregularity we can point to the increase of income, over two hundred a year, as our justification. Of course, we need not speak of our interest in the matter unless we choose."

"But, your Excellency, this paper puts nine thousand pounds of the society's funds at your sole disposal."

"Nominally it does. But of course I acknowledge your rights as co-trustee to the full. The interest," he added, in a lower tone, "will be paid half-yearly, in advance."

Dimitrieff's lips were dry, his hands were cold and trembling.

"If anything were to go wrong," he stammered out.

"Bless me, what can go wrong?" cried the Count, in affected surprise. "Do you suppose a British bank is going to fail because it has nine thousand pounds of the society's money as part of its working capital?—Tell you what, Dimitrieff," sinking his voice almost to a whisper —"If you oblige me in this, and if you should find a way of dealing in a similar way with the remaining eight thousand—and I have it in my power to make such an opportunity for you--I will sign an exactly similar document for you with regard to the rest of the money. I can't propose anything fairer than that."

This was equivalent to a proposal thal they should divide the society's funds between them. But put as Borovitchi had put it, it did not sound quite like that. The Count was plausible and strong. The secretary was poor, greedy of money, and not very scrupulous. A minute later the discussion was over, and the power of attorney, duly executed, was safe in the Count's pocket.

"Really this is a more egregious donkey than I had supposed," said the Count to himself. "What fetched him was the hope of fingering the other half of the money. Can the man be foolish enough to believe that I would allow him to do that?"

The Count's heart swelled with triumph as he pressed his arm over the pocket-book which contained the key to the Nihilists' treasure-box. He was now doubly



secure. Whatever happened—even if Miss Bickersteth. should at the last moment break off the match, even if his hopes of gaining the family estates should be blighted, he would not be ruined. An hour or two would suffice to realise nine thousand pounds—a much larger sum than he had ever before possessed at one time. He would be able to defy the Nihilist society, hiding himself effectually, say in some town of the American Union, or in British India, and there find an opportunity of turning the nine thousand pounds into ninety thousand.

Such were the thoughts that floated through the Count's subtle brain as he took his seat for the last time at the council-table of the Nihilists.

The room was well filled, the attendance of members being larger than usual.

The ordinary business was got through rapidly, and no one seemed to be very much surprised when Count Borovitchi announced that the pressure of his private business obliged him to resign the temporary leadership of the English branch of the society. After a short pause, which nobody took advantage of, the Count went on to suggest that the secretary should fill his place pending instructions from headquarters; and this was agreed to.

Borovitchi then rose, to signify that the meeting was at an end. At that moment a knock was heard at the door, which of course was locked. It was opened, and an



old man entered, worn and haggard. His name burst from the lips of every man present—

"Lobieski!"

"Yes, friends, it is I," said the Jew, advancing to the table, and laying his hand on it, "I am in time, I see. Who is in the chair?"

"I am, my dear M. Lobieski," said the Count, in his usual bland manner. "That is to say, I was; but the meeting is over. Let me congratulate you on your safe return. I am sure, friends and brothers, we are all delighted to see our leader among us once more."

A murmur of approval followed these words.

The Jew smiled grimly.

"I thank you, my friends. But I have business that must be attended to at once. If the meeting is over, it must be re-constituted."

Pressing his foot on that of Dimitrieff, as a sign for him to keep silence, Borovitchi said boldly—

"I repeat that to-night's meeting is closed. You will no doubt resume your position among us at once; and it is in your power to call a fresh meeting when you please—to-morrow, if you like."

With these words he moved away from the table, found his hat, and put it on. The other members, accustomed to defer to the only man of rank in their number, began to follow his example.

"Stay a moment!" cried the Jew, in a tone of menace



that arrested every man's movements, as if it had been a thunderclap, "I have that here which proves and constitutes my authority."

He called to some one outside; and a man entered, a stranger to all in the room. He carried a box with him, which, at a sign from Lobieski, he placed on the table and opened.

The Broken Fetter—symbol of supreme power in the society, which all present looked on with something of superstitious awe, lay before them.

"This," said the Jew, advancing and laying his hand upon it, "this gives me the right to summon a meeting of the society at any time, and the right to your obedience. Brothers, resume your seats."

They obeyed him in silence.

"Some of you," he went on, "have at various times asked to know the name of the chief leader of our Society, the man who forms its plots and directs the execution of them. I will keep the secret no longer. Brothers, I myself am the chief of the Nihilist society."

Every one started, and looked at his neighbour in silence. Dimitrieff, glancing at the Count, noticed that he turned pale.

"I have all along been intimately acquainted with the working of every one of the committees; and for some time it has been evident to me that some one among us is a traitor."

As the last word fell from the lips of the Jew, a sound that resembled nothing but the low growlings of so many beasts of prey filled the room. As Governments fear and hate the Secret society, so the Secret society fears and hates tenfold, a thousand fold, the spy.

Lobieski disregarded the interruption.

"Partly to satisfy my mind on this all-important matter, and partly to attend to other affairs of the Society's business which required my presence, I went to Russia. I knew that the police might have had secret intelligence of my movements; and it was well that I was prepared, for my footsteps were dogged from the moment of my leaving London."

The growl of indignation, loathing, and deadly hate, rose up again. Lobieski raised his hand to suppress it, and continued.

"By the help of some devoted friends in Germany, I succeeded in throwing the spies off the track. I went to St. Petersburg; but the exits were so closely watched that I was detained there for some weeks. From St. Petersburg I went to Birtova, in order that I might enquire on the spot what steps, if any, had been taken to carry out the death sentence which you pronounced in March. At Birtova I was a dozen times on the point of being arrested. I lay for days in a concealed room, just large enough for me to lie in, and about two feet broad. At last I escaped, by means of a boat on the river, in



company with a friend who had managed to escape from the prison, Count Beritza.

"A plot, devilish in its ingenuity and its cold-blooded cruelty, had been laid by the police authorities to entrap another of our number—the Count's sister, who had gone to Birtova to aid her brother after his escape from prison. I more than suspect that the same false heart that betrayed me prompted that outrage. But that I pass by."

"Do you know him? Who is he? What is the villain's name?" resounded on all sides.

"Yes I know him," answered the Jew; and suddenly pointing his lean forefinger at Borovitchi, he cried—

"That is the traitor!"

The howl of rage that both the Count and Lobieski expected to hear did not follow. There was dead silence. The assembled Nihilists had been so accustomed to regard the Count as one of the chief pillars of the society, that they could not, all in a moment, believe that he was a common spy. They thought there must be some mistake.

Borovitchi was quick to take advantage of this.

"My good sir," he said, calmly fixing his eyes on Lobieski, "I think you must be mad." He turned to the assembled Nihilists. "Anxiety and—well, fear have evidently turned the poor man's brain. I, a traitor! Good heavens, what will he say next?"

This was said with a wondering look cast round the room. One or two of the conspirators threw dark glances at him, but the majority seemed puzzled.

Lobieski took two documents from his pocket-book, and handed them to the secretary.

"Be good enough," he said, "to read these aloud."

With faltering tongue, and the drops of perspiration gathering on his brow, Dimitrieff obeyed. They were letters from Colonel Brinski. One referred to the seizure of a secret printing press in Russia, the other to Lobieski's projected journey. Both addressed the Count by name.

For the third time that ominous muttered growl was heard. Men stared into one another's eyes, clenched their fists, and set their teeth.

"Stop, friends," cried the Count; "do you allow yourselves to be duped by this old man, who, I begin to think is more rogue than fool? For anything I know these letters were manufactured. I feel certain that any expert would say they were impudent forgeries. But at all events I have nothing to do with them. It is a very easy thing to write a man's name in a letter. Don't you see that his is not one atom, one tittle of evidence against me?"

The Count, as he said this, stood with his back to the door of the room, close to it, one hand behind him, the other resting in the bosom of his overcoat. A look of disdain was on his face, which to many of those present



seemed the scorn which an honest man unjustly accused feels for his traducers.

"What the Count says is true enough," said one of the Nihilists, suddenly—a powerful man of the lower rank, who had not yet spoken. "What we would like to know sir, is,—Where did you get those two letters? How did you come by them?"

"I will tell you in a moment," said Lobieski. "Go into the next room, and bring here the two persons you will find there."

Borovitchi was compelled to stand back from the door. He had a presentiment that the end had come, and nerved himself to meet whatever fate was in store for him. But he instinctively recoiled two or three steps when Alexis and Ursula Beritza walked into the room. They passed on to the upper end of the table, while Borovitchi resumed his old position by the door.

"This, my brothers," said Lobieski, "is Alexis, Count Beritza, sentenced to life-long imprisonment for the crime of loving his country too well. He was my companion in peril. This lady is his sister, and, I believe, a member of our society. Question the lady yourself, brother," he added, turning to the powerful man who had just spoken.

The man who was addressed took the letters and placed them before Ursula.

"Do you recognise these documents madam?" he asked, bluntly.

"Yes, I know them."

"Perhaps you gave them to Mr. Lobieski?"

"I did."

"Who gave them to you, then?"

"No one. I took them from Count Borovitchi's writing desk."

A silence followed, so profound that if any one in the room had closed his eyes he might have thought himself alone. Everyone looked at Borovitchi.

"That woman," said the Count, with a gesture of contempt, "has been my enemy since her childhood. She has hated me always. She is, by her own confession, a thief. Why should you take her word against mine?"

"The rest of the correspondence is in the writing-table still, I daresay," said Ursula, calmly.

"Another lie!"

"Will you allow us to search the writing-table?" said the man who had taken the lead throughout.

"You do me too much honour," said Borovitchi, with a mocking smile. Outwardly as calm as usual, he was inwardly in a furious passion. He well understood that Ursula had taken the letters from the bundle in the inner drawer of his writing-table, though he could not imagine how or when she had done it. He knew that he owed to her his ruin, and all the consequences of this exposure.

As he looked at her, the deep and bitter resentment he had first felt at seeing a look of contempt in her face, when



she was a little more than a child, and which had sprung up again at intervals in his heart ever since, rose within him like a river rising in time of flood, and mastered him. He gave no outward sign of the passion that was surging within, but at that moment he was as truly devil-possessed as ever man was.

"You say your word is as good as the lady's, yet you refuse to allow your desk to be searched," said his questioner. "Is that your answer?"

"Not exactly," said the Count, in the same calm, even tones as before. "My best answer is this!"

As the words passed his lips he drew his right hand from his breast. It held a small revolver; and before anyone could answer, or call out, or even see what he was doing, he had fired two shots at Ursula as fast as the mechanism would permit.

She swayed to one side, and fell into her brother's arms. Half-a-dozen men rose and sprang towards the assassin. But he was too quick for them. In an instant he was outside the room. Their outstretched hands struck against the closed door. One of them tore madly at the handle, but it was held with a powerful grip on the other side, and next moment a key grated in the lock. Borovitchi had foreseen, whenever Lobieski appeared, that an attempt might be made to seize him, and had withdrawn the key from the lock by means of his left hand as he stood with his back to the door. Long

before the lock could be forced, the Count had fled.

Next morning, a few minutes before ten o'clock, a ma with long black hair, and a full black beard tinged wit grey—no moustache—might have been seen standing i a doorway at the foot of an alley just opposite the Londo and Provincial Bank, in the City. He wore a suit c very dark tweeds, a soft felt hat, and spectacles, an looked like a German professor out for a holiday. H was apparently busy searching among the names painte on the doorposts for one he wanted to find. But th moment the doors of the bank were opened to the publi the German professor abandoned his quest, crossed th street, and went into the bank.

He was one of the first to enter. Going up to one c the cashiers, he took a letter from his breast-pocket, an handed it across the counter.

"You had better see the manager," said the cashie running his eye over the letter. "That is his room,' and he pointed to a large glass door.

As the professor was making his way to the door, stranger walking very rapidly from the main entrance made straight for the door. The professor lengthene (without quickening) his pace, and reached the glass doo just as the stranger was entering the room. This enable him to glance inside. He saw two men sitting togethe near the wall. One was Dimitrieff, pale as a condemne criminal; the other was an old man—Lobieski.



Dimitrieff and Lobieski had both looked up when the door opened; but seeing a man he did not know Lobieski had again bent his eyes on the floor. The secretary was still looking towards the door when the German professor peered over the stranger's shoulder. Dimitrieff started and turned even paler than he was before, for in the black-bearded spectacled German he had recognised Borovitchi. But the Count's gaze seemed to fascinate him. He neither moved nor spoke; and when the stranger turned round to see who was following him, Borovitchi had disappeared.

He was never again seen in London. But six months later, in the city of Belgrade, a policeman came one night upon a man sitting on the pavement, close to the wall of the Russian Consulate. At first the policeman supposed that the man was tipsy. He was not drunk, but dead. He had been stabbed to the heart.

Very little was heard of the incident, the newspapers ascribing the death to a street quarrel. But the officials at the Consulate knew that the murdered man was one of the agents of the Russian secret police, and that his true name was Count Borovitchi. They also knew (though the journalists did not) that pinned to the Count's breast there had been found an envelope bearing the words—

A TRAITOR;

and that just underneath these words was a curious mark, like part of a chain with one of the links broken asunder.

CHAPTER XXX

A Wedding and a Betrothal

Lobieski and the young Count, after making thei escape from Birtova by means of the river, had bee forced to return to England by way of the Black Sea, s as to avoid the difficulty of crossing the western frontie of the Russian Empire. They reached London, howeve not long after Ursula and her companion arrived. It wa a happy meeting between brother and sister when, afte so many dangers and hardships, they at last came fac to face, and rushed with one accord into each other's arms

If Ursula had remembered the packet which she ha left for M. Lobieski at his house, she would probably hav tried to regain possession of it, and save her cousin fro the consequences of his treachery, warning him, at th same time, that his double-dealing had been discovered But in her joy at finding her brother, the packet escape her recollection. Rachel, of course, handed it to he



master, who used it as we have seen. Even at the last moment, Ursula would have refused to give evidence against her cousin had it not been for her brother's assuring her that if Borovitchi's perfidy was concealed by her, he would send him a challenge, and risk his own life sooner than the arch-traitor should go unpunished.

Before they reached England, Dr. Stanford and Ursula were betrothed, and when he entreated her not to delay the marriage beyond a few weeks, she had neither the power nor the desire to refuse him. There was some discussion, however, as to the spot they should choose for their future home. Stanford did not think that the neighbourhood of London would make an ideal place of residence, either for Ursula or for himself. He had found suburban life something more than dull; and he knew that it was of prime importance that his wife's days should be full of healthy interests, so that if possible her mind might recover its tone—that she might forget the anxious and troubled scenes of the last two years, and become the same bright, light-hearted girl she was before. The money difficulty, however, stood in the way; for Stanford's practice was but a small one, and if sold would fetch very little.

It was Lobieski who found a way to fulfil their wishes. He succeeded in finding a speculator who stood well with the Russian Government, and persuaded him to purchase Ursula's right to the family estates. To be sure, she received only a fraction of their value; but, as Lobieski

pointed out to her, if she attempted to claim the estates, the Russian Government would at once have proclaimed her an outlaw, on acount of her escape from custody at Birtova,and would have declared her estates to be forfeited.

The sum which Lobieski succeeded in pulling, as it were, out of the fire was fourteen thousand pounds; and this money Alexis and Ursula divided between them. Alexis determined to go out to Australia and learn sheep-farming, intending to buy an estate if he found the country suited him, and found a new Beritza under the shelter of the English flag. And after a good many plans had been proposed and rejected, Stanford and his wife decided that they, too, would go to Australia, and after some experience of the country, choose between one of the large seaports and the bush. If they preferred the latter they could join Alexis, or settle near him. If the former, Stanford's profession would stand him in good stead. It need hardly be said that Ursula used part of the money to redeem Maud's jewels.

Just a fortnight after these resolutions were taken, Stanford and Ursula were united. It was a very quiet wedding, the only guests being Lobieski and Maud Bickersteth, who acted as bridesmaid.

Ursula's astonishment when her friend first told her that she was engaged to be married to Count Borovitchi may be imagined. With characteristic effrontery the Count had written to Maud and her father on his way to



Dover, explaining that he was suddenly recalled to his own country by the Czar, on account of an important political mission which was to be entrusted to him. He did not anticipate, he said, that the marriage need be postponed on that account; but he would telegraph on his arrival in Russia.

That was the last either Mr. Bickersteth or his daughter ever heard of Count Borovitchi. No doubt the dread he entertained that the Nihilists would speedily revenge themselves for the treachery he had been guilty of, joined to the certainty that the money he had depended on could not now be obtained, drove him away from England. Maud was awaiting news of him when Ursula amazed her by telling her the Count's real character and the true cause of his sudden departure.

For some time Mr. Bickersteth refused to believe Ursula's account of her cousin. It was impossible that the Count should turn out badly, for that would be equivalent to admitting that Mr. Bickersteth's judgment and perspicacity had been woefully at fault. At last, however, the banker was moved to make some inquiries, and the result was so disastrous to the old gentleman's health—in other words to his self-esteem—that his doctor prescribed a prolonged tour in the South of France and Italy, so as to afford him the best means of recovering from the shock he had sustained. Maud was the subject of a good deal of undeserved praise from her father for the noble way in

which she had borne the terrible discovery of her lover's unworthiness. So far as the terminating of the engagement was concerned, that was to her a welcome relief.

Frank begged that he might be allowed to join the expedition as courier and attached friend; and he pleaded his cause so urgently before Mr. Bickersteth, that after some hesitation the desired leave was granted.

"I think, dear," said Ursula to her friend when she heard of this arrangement, "that most likely before you come back to England something will have happened."

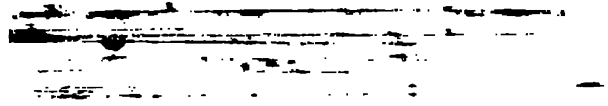
"Indeed, Ursula, you are quite mistaken!" cried Maud earnestly, her colour rising as she spoke. "Frank never really cared for me, and any little feeling I may have once indulged for him died a natural death long ago. We are good friends, certainly, as we have always been; but it is quite impossible that we should ever be anything more to each other. I do hope, Ursula, you will never hint at anything of the kind again. It will pain me very much if you do."

Ursula kissed her companion and promised compliance; but when she next met her lover she ventured on a prophecy concerning Maud—a prophecy which was justified by the event; for she and her husband had been just six weeks in Australia when she received a letter from her old friend, simply announcing the fact that she was the happiest girl in the world.

THE END.

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